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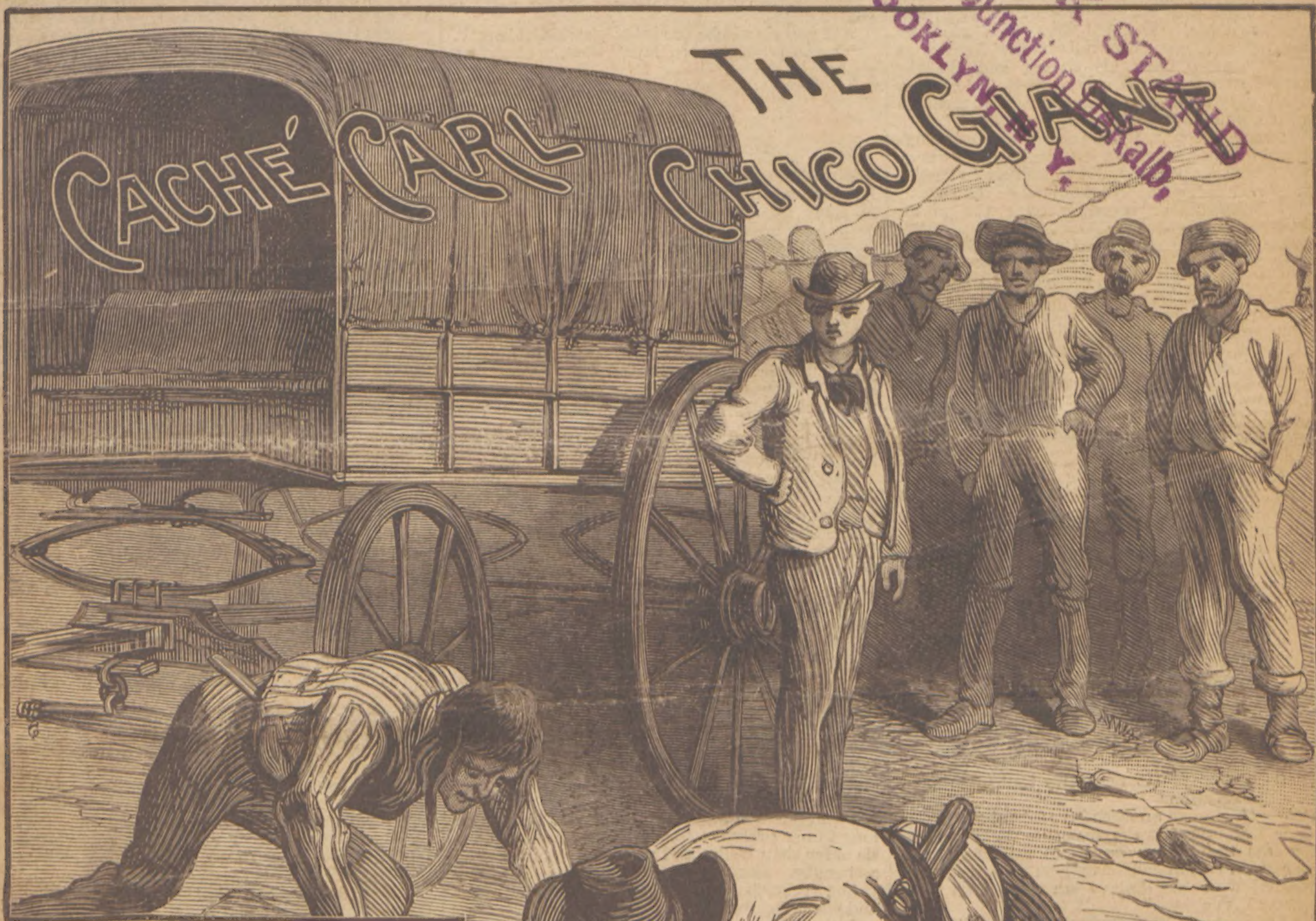
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OR,

The True Hearts of Red-Eye Roost.

A Romance of the Colorado Ranges.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"
(Maj. Sam S. Hall.)

AUTHOR OF "LITTLE LONE STAR," "OLD ROCKY'S
'BOYEES,'" "THE DAISY FROM DEN-
VER," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW ON THE HEARTH.

"You may call me silly and superstitious, and I presume I am all that and more, but I cannot shake off the presentiment I have had ever since father set out on such a wild journey."

The speaker was a young girl, and decidedly



ON HANDS AND KNEES THE MANT SCOUT AND HIS UTE PARD CAREFULLY SCRUTINIZED EVERY INCH OF THE GROUND.

fair to look upon—a beautiful blonde, with abundant tresses of rich golden hair, and a well-developed though *petite* form.

"That is nothing new, Della," was the reply of her brother. "You have been haunted with it, ever since those black shadows first fell upon us."

"You are right, Dashiell. From the day that papa first intimated his intention of taking those men into co-partnership, I have been in a constant state of the most painful apprehension."

"Oh, nonsense, Della!"

"It is not nonsense, and you know it, Dash. You, yourself, opposed the arrangement from the first, and far more openly than I did. You never believed in William Black, or John either; and—"

"Less now than ever, sis."

"Just what I have imagined. I cannot but think, somehow, that the lucky speculations into which these men led papa were but a trap, or at least baits to one; and the trap itself is at Pocketville, and is known as—"

"The Flush-Hand Mine."

"Precisely."

"What a wise little sister it is!" said Dashiell Darrington, half-mockingly; but there was a troubled expression on his face as he spoke.

They were the only children of David Darrington, these two; and were, as we are introduced to them, the sole occupants of their beautiful frontier home. Dashiell was now nineteen years of age, and was universally known as "Dash," more from his daring and dashing character than as a mere abbreviation. He was a strikingly handsome young fellow of medium stature, muscular, and quick in motion.

Young as he was, Dash Darrington was an experienced camper and mountain roamer, whenever it was possible for him to indulge in such a life; never being happier than when hunting in the mountains, or speeding over the plain, mounted on his favorite horse.

His sister was but sixteen, and has been already described.

Their mother had been, for some years dead.

A brother of David Darrington, named Dudley, was generally an inmate of the household, but he was somewhat eccentric, of a most retiring disposition, and was generally accounted a mere cipher.

Their home, as has been said, was a happy and beautiful one; but, had their happiness in it been uninterrupted, we should not have been called upon to write their history. But a dark cloud hovered over the lives of the brother and sister, and also over that of their now absent father, who had been fated to form friendly and business relations with those whose aim it was to ruin him and his.

The business partners of David Darrington, to whom allusion has been made, were two brothers named John and William Black, the latter of whom had accompanied him on his trip to Pocketville.

"Why did papa decide to dispose of his third of the mine?" inquired Della.

"Saunders and Brooks, the men in charge, who own the remaining two thirds, wrote, offering fifty thousand dollars for his share."

"Which he originally purchased for twenty-five thousand, did he not?"

"Just so."

"Then why was it necessary that he should go to Pocketville?"

"Oh, they have another investment ready for him. You know how credulous poor father is. It seems the Blacks have had an offer of an interest in two marvelously rich mines, for one hundred thousand dollars—an additional fifty thousand, you see—"

"And he takes that amount with him?"

The anxious look on Della Darrington's face now became one of alarm.

"No, he has sent that by his bankers, through the Express Company, to Pocketville."

"And Bill Black persisted in going with papa?"

"Oh, father was very glad to have him."

"I wish you had gone, Dash."

"Thank you. I did really want to go, on more than one account, but father decided that I had better remain in Denver with you and Uncle Dudley."

The young girl was silent for some moments. At last she spoke:

"I would not have been afraid to remain here."

"Not then, perhaps, but now?"

"Nor now, Dash."

"I am glad of that, Della, for—"

"You think of going to Pocketville? You are convinced, as I am, that something is wrong?"

"I am, Della; but I fear to leave you while John Black remains in the office, and when he knows that I have set out after father—"

"But he need not."

"He will, however."

"Not at all, Dash. You go hunting so often, and are away in fact a great part of the time on one pretense or another, that he will suspect nothing."

"I fear he may. But never mind; I'll give out that I am on a lone hunt; and so, by the way, I am."

"But what has decided you so suddenly?"

"I will tell you, Della. I picked up in the office this morning a slip of paper which had evidently escaped John Black's notice, and which confirms our worst fears."

"Oh, Dash! Is it a trap, then?"

"Yes; the Blacks are what we have feared from the first, and Saunders and Brooks, father's partners in the Flush-Hand, are but tools and paid agents of theirs."

"And the mine?"

"An old worked-out affair, you may depend. As for the proposed fresh investment in the other two, I am convinced they exist only on paper!"

Della Darrington sunk into a chair.

She had apprehended the worst, and yet, as it ever happens, was unprepared for it when it came.

"If you should be too late," she said at length.

"I shall not be too late," was the confident reply.

CHAPTER II.

THE SERPENT IN EDEN.

WORDS cannot describe the anxiety of Della Darrington after being informed by her brother of their father's danger, and when the young man had hastily set out to his rescue. And, torturing, indeed, must have been the emotions of Dashiell himself, from the moment he learned, beyond a doubt, the object of Bill Black in alluring his father to Pocketville.

In addition to this, Dash was tormented in mind, on account of being forced to leave his sister with no protector except their simple-minded uncle; for both he and Della feared that John Black would, in some manner, to them unexpected and unprepared for, commit some villainous deed.

Dash feared for his sister's safety, and Della feared for herself.

And their fears were not groundless, as, in spite of their gloomy apprehensions, they strove to convince themselves.

The home of the Darringtons, in the suburbs of Denver, was an elegant and luxurious one. Nature had done much, and wealth more, to make it so.

Long rows of noble trees, with flowers, arbors, walks, and rustic seats, dotted the grounds; and amid them stood a substantial and well-appointed mansion.

There were but three servants in the establishment; a man who acted as hostler and gardener, a female cook, and a young woman named Florette Forbes, who attended to the chamber work, as well as assisting Miss Darrington in plain sewing and a general superintendence of household affairs.

With none of these, except Florette, shall we have aught to do, and she had not been very long in her present situation. She was but little older than Della, and was also somewhat of a beauty, although just the opposite of her young mistress in complexion, being a bright and sparkling brunette.

Attractive though Florette Forbes was in appearance, yet, did one see her when in one of her fits of temper, he would be filled with aversion; so treacherous and vengeful were her every glance and expression.

But, Florette took good care to guard against this, when in the presence of any member of her employer's family. She was, in reality, the daughter of Mr. Darrington's partner, William Black. Her mother, long since dead, had been a Mexican woman.

The Darringtons, of course, knew nothing of this. The girl had been commanded by her father to enter the service of David Darrington, and to act as a spy for him; and this she had done from the first.

She cordially hated her young mistress, although Della was far from suspecting the fact.

When Florette Forbes first went to the Darringtons, she began by detesting the whole household; but she soon became very fond of Dashiell, eventually loving him with all the passionate nature of her mother's race. Yet she

betrayed nothing of this, but rather gave the object of her infatuation reason to believe she disliked him.

Had Bill Black known of Florette's love for Dash, his plans might have been changed; for the one redeeming quality in his depraved nature was his affection for his daughter.

Through this young girl's eavesdropping, Dash Dare's destination became known to John Black. When the youth had intimated to his sister the great peril of their father, Florette was secreted in the adjoining apartment and heard every word that was spoken.

It had been impossible for her to escape from her concealment until Dash had prepared for his journey, and, for the second time, had rushed into his sister's presence to take leave of her. Then, as soon as possible, she stole from the house and hastened to the counting-room, a heavy veil concealing her face.

John Black recognized her, however, and invited her into his private office; well knowing that something of importance had happened at the Darringtons, or Florette would not have come to report.

As his brother was absent, playing the great game that was to enrich them both, John naturally suspected that the visit of his niece had some bearing on their plot.

He began to fear that something had gone wrong with the delectable Bill, yet this seemed preposterous. Closing the door of the office, after he had followed Florette inside, he exclaimed impatiently:

"In the fiend's name, girl, what brings you here? Speak out, and to the point!"

"Dash Dare has left Denver," she replied.

"Well, what if he has?"

"Uncle John, you are very careless."

"Don't uncle me! It is dangerous! We cannot be too cautious. Now, Florette, forget for a moment that you are a woman, and tell me, in a few plain words, what you mean!"

"You received a letter recently from those Flush-Hand Mine men, at Pocketville?"

"Yes. We receive letters from them frequently."

"Your last letter was intended to be private. Yet you did not read what was written on an inclosed slip—something that was more important, I suspect, than the letter itself."

"The mischief!"

"Just so. You threw the envelope under your desk, and in it was a paper which explained father's object in taking Mr. Darrington to Pocketville."

The naturally swarthy face of John Black became positively hideous.

"Speak out!" he almost yelled. "How do you know this?"

"Dash found the envelope, and read the inclosure, which it seems you had failed to notice. He has told Della, and has set out in haste for Pocketville. What are we to do?"

Florette actually wrung her hands in an agony of anxiety.

John Black seemed to be paralyzed.

At length, by a great effort, he recovered himself.

He then spoke in a hoarse voice of concentrated fury and desperate resolve:

"Curses on that brat! He'll frustrate all our plans yet, I'll bet my life!"

"They can't complete the sale of the mine before to-morrow, and old Darrington's money will reach them to-night by the Express."

"Curse the luck, I say! But, never mind, Bill will find a way to work the racket, and win yet."

"You don't mean that they will kill Dash Dare?"

Florette was off her guard when she put this question, in her excitement.

Like a flash the truth darted through John Black's mind, and guided his answer.

He now knew that this niece of his was in love with young Darrington, and that she would sacrifice all else for that love—for such was her nature. Then came a new inspiration.

By bringing about a union between Dash and Florette, fifty thousand dollars more—for that amount had the young man inherited from his mother—would be gained!

There were, clearly, other games to play, if William should by any chance fail in the one they had now on hand.

John mentally cursed himself for his carelessness.

Both loss and exposure seemed imminent.

But he hesitated not in answering the question of his niece. It would not admit of hesitation.

"Kill the boy? Why, of course not! There will be no occasion for that. But your father

will never again return to Denver. He cannot after this."

John Black knew very well by the manner and expression of Florette, that, were he to say Dashiell Darington must be put out of the way, she would herself ride off direct to Pocketville to prevent it.

"Neither can I remain here," he continued. "You and I must get out of this, and the coming darkness must signal our start. Can you be ready, Florette?"

The girl knew that this meant going to join her father, who might be in danger, and also to meet Dash; and she was eager to go.

"Yes, yes," she replied, quickly; "I'll get ready at once!"

"But we are not to go alone, Florette. There is some one else, and it is our only chance. Della Darington goes with us, and it must be by force, of course!"

"I'll get a trusty man to assist. We'll tie up the gardener and the cook, and take the big ambulance and two horses. As for old Dudley—"

"He is not at home."

"So much the better. You must give Della an opiate, for we want no fuss of any kind. Get everything ready that we require. Return at once!"

"I shall close the store and leave everything here as it is, for I want no suspicions as to the truth until we are far from here."

John Black thought of Dash, but feared to speak of him again before Florette.

There was a murderous expression upon his face.

The next moment his precious niece glided out. She was gone on her outrageous mission.

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING SIGHT.

JOHN BLACK hastened to prepare for flight, collecting all the money due the firm that he could possibly secure without exciting suspicion. He also secured the services of a man who had formerly belonged to their outlaw gang, and who had drifted to Denver.

This was a low-browed, evil-faced Mexican, who had been known among his brutal associates in the mountains as Don Diablo. And devilish in the extreme was his character, as well as his appearance. He was rejoiced at the prospect of returning to the mountains, and the lawless life which was a second nature to him.

John Black had given him his directions in regard to the abduction of Della Darington. He had vowed that her fortune, and that of her brother, should be his by some means. He would keep the maiden captive until she would gladly take such measures as would enable him with safety to himself to secure the fifty thousand dollars which she held in her own name and subject to her order.

He believed, too, that he could, through his niece, get possession of Dash's fortune; although he had no plan, as yet, in his mind, to effect this.

He must first meet Bill, and then they could plot together.

And Florette?

John Black had noticed her expression when young Darington's name was mentioned, and she had caught the murderous tone of voice her uncle had used when last speaking of Dash Dare; and she knew, upon reflection, that her father would not hesitate to kill the youth if he came in his way or attempted to thwart him.

She vowed that she would prevent this.

She was soon in her apartment once more, without her absence having been detected. Della Darington was too much worried about her father for aught else to occupy her thoughts. Her state of mind was favorable to Florette, who now busied herself in preparing for the coming night journey.

She succeeded, also, in drugging the cup of B which she brought her young mistress.

But by the time John Black and Don Diablo heaved the house, Della was in a sound sleep. The hostler was knocked senseless, bound and

Heard, and the cook treated in like manner. Lathered the horses and ambulance were ready, jolly fanwhile, Florette and John Black had been run tacking the rooms and collecting all such and tobles as could be put in small compass.

All delay was made, for time was valuable. heartedablo knew the country like a book, and he

His ed they could reach the near vicinity of and getville before daylight.

light, la Darington, in a death-like stupor, was ed out and placed upon a blanket couch in Pre ambulance.

orette occupied the back seat, and John

Black, having a slouch hat pulled low down upon his forehead, seated himself with the Mexican driver, after first seeing that the doors of the house were fastened.

The hostler and cook were left bound in the barn, and Black secured also the gate which led into the street. It was then dark.

Don Diablo had been directed to follow a trail that was little used, and which although rough would save many miles of travel.

Thus it happened that when David Darington was in great distress of mind at Red-Eye Roost, fearing robbery and murder, and while his son was fast approaching Pocketville, the daughter and sister was being hurried toward the same point, in a senseless condition, and in the power of merciless foes.

And, when the startling events were happening on the rocky mountain shelf, when Dash Dare was gazing spell-bound at the same, and when Bill Black was meeting his doom at the hand of the miners—while all this was transpiring, John Black was hurrying his unconscious captive toward Pocketville.

It was near morning, however, before the ambulance reached a point within a half-mile of the town, and for at least five miles Don Diablo had been forced to follow the stage road. But as they knew the stage had passed through Pocketville, and thence down the range the previous evening, they did not have any idea of danger from being observed by driver or passengers.

John Black knew that did they meet any one, the ambulance and horses would attract particular attention, and this he wished to avoid. Indeed, it would be extremely dangerous to be discovered, and lead any who might pursue, on the direct trail to overtake them. Besides, should Dash find his father, and reveal the plot, the two might start back toward Denver, and in passing recognize their horses and vehicle.

Such a discovery would be certain death.

The moon shone brightly, and upon reaching a point one mile from the town, Don Diablo, at the bidding of his employer, turned the team from the road, further from the foot of the range. They then proceeded parallel with the same, amid the scattering mesquites, at a sufficient distance from the stage road to escape observation from the same.

"Drive down abreast of the town," said Black; "we'll secure the team, and then reconnoiter. We must find Bill, or else Saunders and Brooks, at once. Confound that brat, Dash! If he's upset our plot, I'll torture him!"

The Mexican obeyed, holding the horses at a slow pace. Florette was now asleep.

John Black was destined to find his brother much sooner than he expected.

But, what a discovery it was to be!

The Fates, it would almost seem, were directing the course taken by Don Diablo.

The bright rays of the moon now rendered the shades darker and more somber by contrast. It was a wild, weird scene to their west, and above the mesquites, which never grow tall.

The serrated peaks of the range here, black as ink where shaded by projecting rocks from the moon, and the clumps of cacti, growing here and there where nothing else would grow, these seemed like huge beasts at the entrance of their dens.

Both the Mexican and his master seemed gloomily impressed by the somber scene, and neither of them spoke a word. In a little while, however, the horses' ears pricked forward, and they gave half-suppressed snorts.

"The beasts scent the town," said Black, in a cautious tone, but more like a question.

"The town is not ahead, señor," returned the Greaser, guardedly and suspiciously.

"Then, in the fiend's name, what alarms them? Jerk up, if you think—"

Just then there came a startling interruption to the speech of John Black.

The Mexican was turning around a thick motte of mesquites, to head the horses toward the town; thus to prove in what direction the beasts had scented that which had alarmed them.

In an instant the superb steeds gathered all their strength, sprung high in air to the left, with terrific snorts, and snapping the pole short off; as, bounding away, they jerked Don Diablo, who held tight to the reins, from his seat, sending him through the air. The Greaser struck a swaying object.

He instantly recognized its character, as he was hurled against it.

Don Diablo gave vent to his terror by a shriek, and then struck at the pendent mass; the blow causing it to sway back and forth, as he fell in a senseless heap beneath it.

The ambulance, having been forced against the under branches of the mesquites, was now concealed from view, except in front.

But what of John Black?

For the time, the horses had hid that which had terrified them from his view.

It was only for an instant, however.

Soon the eyes of the swarthy miscreant became fixed upon it, in unspeakable horror.

For a moment, he saw that swaying form—the form of a man, hanging by the neck, the rope being attached to a limb above!

Then Black gave out a gurgling unearthly groan, and fell from his seat to the earth.

With a heavy, sudden sound, he struck, and there he lay senseless, while beyond, beneath that horrible corpse, lay Don Diablo, also as devoid of sense as the cadaver which slowly swayed over him, and nearly touched his face.

And no wonder was it that John Black had fainted, for, in that hideous form, in that fearfully contorted face, he recognized his brother, Bill Black!

Passing strange had it been, that Don Diablo had guided the horses directly toward it.

He and his employer had been seeking William Black, and they had found him!

From the interior of the vehicle there had come no cry, as was to have been expected—But, there were good reasons. Florette Forbes had been forced violently forward by the sudden halt of the horses, her head striking the camp-chest, rendering her unconscious; while Della, fortunately for her, still remained under the influence of the powerful drug her treacherous maid had administered.

Had not the men of Pocketville been, at that hour, asleep from their fatigue and the deep potations of the evening previous, the hapless maiden might then have been rescued and restored to her father and brother, now also sleeping soundly in the Red-Eye Roost, which was within plain view from the side of the mesquite motte opposite the ambulance.

But the cruel fates had ordained otherwise.

CHAPTER IV.

AMONG THE POCKETVILLIANS.

IT WAS NOT ONLY the children of David Darington who had warned him against his business partners from the start. Every one in Denver seemed suspicious of them.

Adventurers they certainly were. Nobody knew where they had resided for any length of time. They themselves asserted that they had led roaming lives in the mountain mines; and, as they were well acquainted with mining matters generally, this was not doubted.

The real character of the Blacks was black, indeed. In reality they had been mountain bandits in New Mexico.

But this was some time ago. Nearly all of their band had been disposed of by Judge Lynch, and the hopeful pair had been obliged to seek "green fields and pastures new." These they fixed upon in more civilized regions, with a view of committing robberies in another way.

They had begun by selecting Darington as their victim, and they had, as will be shown, a well-formed plot to ruin him.

The mine at Pocketville, known as the "Flush-Hand," was indeed almost worthless; and the firm that claimed to own two-thirds of the same was a bogus one. The prospect, also, of a profitable investment for the credulous victim's hundred thousand dollars was even more a delusion and a snare.

Yet Darington was enchanted. Everything was carried out precisely as the Blacks counseled, and William Black and David Darington made the trip on horseback.

Arriving in Pocketville, it was not long before the "crookedness" of Black and his two agents, Brooks and Saunders, was made apparent to the citizens of that burg. The former was recognized by one whom he had robbed, and left for dead, in his "road-agent" days.

This man was now a recluse, living near the old mine, and known among the "citz" as "Mountain Misery." His one pard was a renegade Indian, Ugalala, also known as "Red-Eye," and through him the hermit was enabled to work out his vengeance upon his old foe.

The plot of Bill Black to throw his partner down the shaft of the old mine failed.

That fate was reserved for his tools, the ostensible owners of the "Flush-Hand."

Black fled, when he saw that his real character was known, but was captured by Ugalala, and brought back to the burg, which he had so recently entered in company with his intended victim, and with all the airs of a man of wealth and consequence.

The excitement in Pocketville, which centered

in the principal hostelry of the town, and which went by the suggestive appellation of "Red-Eye Roost," was at its height—David Darington being also missing from the burg—when Dash, arriving from Denver on his mission, galloped up to the hotel.

The chief actor there was a young giant, hailing from Chico, and calling himself Cache Carl, who was now lording it in high style, in a "jamboree." Cache Carl was a recent arrival, and was universally known to be "square and white."

Dashiell Darington told his story, and all started with him on the search.

It was not long before the now thoroughly terrified dupe of Bill Black was found, where he lay concealed, the poor man not knowing what fate might yet await him, and brought back to the town. The "citz" had only waited for this, before executing their unanimous sentence upon Black.

The villain had short shrift.

Mountain Misery, one of his earliest victims, was the willing executioner.

An examination of the papers found in the office of the Flush-Hand Mine revealed the entire plot. Besides this, William Black had been recognized by more than one, at the last, as an ex-bandit chief.

"No crooked piece o' double distilled cussedness this side o' New Mex'," said Cache Carl, "than what yer hes jist strung up, pards. I knowed ther cuss, but 'twas by another handle, though fer that matter he hed slathers o' them. I reckon Black, ther one picked up last, fitted ther posy es well es ther next, an' war a good one ter go off by."

"Ef thar's any one on top o' dust an' kickin', what kin come anywar nigh this yere fresh-choked cuss in crookedness, hit's a brother what he owned somewhar, an' not far off neither, I don't reckon. When yer kills a rattler, hit's mate air bound ter be somewhar near."

"I come cl'ar from Chico in s'arch o' ther or'nary kites, an' I'll keep it up till I finds t'other."

It was decided accordingly, that Cache Carl, with Mountain Misery, should accompany the Daringtons to Denver, and secure John Black; the father and brother being not a little anxious in regard to Della's safety.

And well they might, when we reflect that she had been left, almost unprotected, in the near vicinity of the twin brother of Bill Black!

CHAPTER V.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

WHEN David Darington and Bill Black alighted from their horses opposite Red-Eye Roost, on their arrival in Pocketville, the latter recognized the hostler as one of his former outlaw band, named Dick Dirk. This cognomen he had gained from carrying in his belt, instead of the usual bowie, a long and sharp-pointed Spanish dirk.

Black had been greatly surprised and at first alarmed, at this meeting; but he had both bribed and threatened Dick, and had then entered the hotel without the mutual recognition having been observed by any one.

Afterward, this worthy had been induced to take the horses of the two travelers from the stable to a thicket, when the pair had set out secretly for the old mine.

But the fright of Dick Dirk was great when he saw, later on, the bringing in of Black, and then of Darington, from the mountain. And, when he saw his old leader hanged by the miners, he fled in terror to the rocks, and up the side of the range; for he feared that the mob would believe him to have been in league with Black, on account of his having gotten out the horses secretly, not even saying anything of it to Crystal Charley, the bartender.

Dick knew the crowd would either hang him on the spot, or else thrash him half to death, and then order him to "git" from the burg. Consequently he "got," before the miners had returned from the hanging.

Up amid the rocks he secreted himself, listening to the sounds of the carouse that had followed the "Lynch picnic," and trembling lest search might be made for him. Thus he remained until the town became quiet.

He then decided that, as all were undoubtedly asleep, he would skirmish around on a tour of inspection. He was almost dying for a drink of whisky, but he knew it would endanger his life to enter the hotel.

No sooner had Dick reached the base of the range, by stealthy movements, than an unaccountable desire seized him to gaze once more on the form and face of his old bandit leader,

Bill Black. A horrible fascination seemed to take possession of him when once he had passed beyond the stable, and he could not look in any direction except toward the point where he knew the corpse of his former captain was hanging from a gigantic mesquite.

When concealed among the rocks, and just previous to starting from the same, he had heard, or fancied he heard, sounds in the direction of the gallows tree. This fact impressed him with feelings of superstitious horror, for his nerves were by this time decidedly shaky, and he could account for these sounds but in one way.

He half believed that Satan had come, and carried Bill Black bodily away!

He had often heard that this was a way his sooty Majesty had in such special cases. At all events, he made up his mind that he must know if Black's body was still there. Should he find it gone, Dick Dirk resolved that henceforth he would not be tempted, on any consideration, to become mixed up in any "crooked" business.

No longer did he pay any attention to what might be behind him. He seemed to forget that he was in danger of meeting the same fate with which Black had been overwhelmed.

All his interest and attention were fixed ahead, in horrible anticipation; every sense being strained to catch the slightest sound, and to detect the slightest object that belonged not to nature. As he approached the motte, east of which was the ambulance, and south the corpse still hanging, with Don Diablo and John Black on the ground beneath it, the blood seemed to congeal in horror in the veins of Dick Dirk.

He knew that his sense of hearing had not deceived him this time.

Whose the corpse might be, he knew not and cared not; but he felt sure that the body of Bill Black lay on the ground near him.

What was best for him to do?

Should he seek to restore his old captain, and convey him to a place of hiding, it was probable that the latter would either blame him for the treatment he had received, or force him to aid in his vengeance upon the men of Pocketville.

Dick was greatly demoralized in mind and nerve.

He resolved to creep around the east side of the motte, and stealthily reconnoiter. But barely had he turned the end of the group of mesquites, when to his fresh horror, a huge black mass seemed to project from the motte, the character of which was a mystery.

This was the ambulance.

He heard a groan proceeding from it.

While he stood gazing with distended eyes at the dark object so near him, Dick beheld, staggering around it, and coming toward him, what he fully believed to be Bill Black himself.

This was more than his shattered nerves could stand. With a loud cry, he fell on his face before John Black, the twin brother of the man who was hanging dead so near them.

John had revived, and staggered toward the wagon, having heard a groan from one of the females.

At that very moment, the Mexican, who had also recovered and detected the approach of a stranger, sprung upon Dick with uplifted knife; but before it could descend, John Black clutched the Greaser's arm, and said hoarsely:

"Hold, Don Diablo! I know that face. I believe he came to cut poor Bill down, and thought me his ghost!"

"*Santissima Maria!*" exclaimed the Mexican. "It is Dick Dirk!"

"So it is, and I am glad of it! We need help now, if ever. The hell-hounds who hanged my brother shall pay dearly for this night's work!"

Don Diablo poured some water upon the head of Dick, and soon saw him revive.

When John Black had regained his senses, the first thing he beheld was the slowly swaying corpse of his brother. He knew then that all was lost.

Dash Dare and his father still lived, and the youth had brought Bill to the gallows!

Bill had been the leading spirit of the two, and the surviving brother could but swear an impotent oath of vengeance. For revenge upon the Daringtons he would henceforth live.

John saw that Don Diablo had vanished, but he believed the Greaser to be searching for the horses. This, he knew, was useless. They must now baste into the recesses of the range and secrete themselves, or they would be discovered and lynched at once.

John Black felt that he held a terrible vengeance in his hands. He had now in his power

the sole daughter of the house and heart of the Daringtons.

When Dick Dirk recovered consciousness he at once agreed to guide them to a retreat safe from discovery. His own terror was little less than theirs.

Had he known of the resemblance of the hermit, Mountain Misery, to Bill Black, he would have thought John to be the former, when he first saw him staggering around the ambulance; but as he had not remained long enough in Pocketville to witness the last exciting scenes of the previous evening, he had never seen the mountain recluse.

Florette Forbes was soon awake and in her right mind, and the trio quickly explained matters to her, as far as was necessary. John Black had forbidden the others to mention to the girl that her father had been hanged, or to allow her to see the body hanging to the mesquite.

The first words spoken by Florette expressed the greatest apprehension.

"In Heaven's name, what has happened? Uncle John, where are you?"

All was dark, at this time, in the ambulance.

The men stood beside the conveyance, having torn open the canvas cover.

"I am here, Florette," said her uncle; "but make no noise whatever, for we are but a short distance from Pocketville, and discovery means death to me."

"We have met with an accident, and must abandon the ambulance. The horses have run away. Gather up all the necessary wearing apparel that you can carry without inconvenience, and give this man a load."

"He is a friend of mine, and of your father, from down the range."

John Black indicated Dick Dirk as he spoke.

"But I do not understand—"

Thus began Florette.

"There is no time for further explanations. If we linger we are lost. You can accompany Dick. Don Diablo will carry our captive. You must have given her an overdose, for she is still under the influence of the opiate."

Florette was thoroughly frightened.

She threw blankets and clothing into the arms of the Mexican, who was not a little puzzled and bewildered.

Black had told Dick nothing of the fact that the captive maiden was the daughter of David Darington; and he soon found an opportunity of cautioning his niece and Don Diablo against betraying the relationship, for he was not without fear, under the circumstances, that his old ally might yet desert them.

The Greaser wrapped a blanket around the insensible form of poor Della, and followed Dick and Florette; the former leading the party northward, and in such a manner as to prevent the daughter from discovering the corpse of her father dangling from the tree.

Securing as much food as it was possible for him to carry, John Black hastened after Dick Dirk, who was leading them by a circuitous route to the trail up along the ledge; having in mind the old shaft, near the scene of the tragic death of Bill's tools, Saunders and Brooks, as a hiding-place.

He reasoned that this would be about the last place in which the men of Pocketville would think of searching for them.

The rocky shelf would not betray their passage across it. Plenty of "sign" of their presence had been left near the motte of mesquites; but, should Darington and his son start on their return to Denver before the discovery of the ambulance, there was no one in the town who could possibly know to whom it belonged.

It would be a mystery to Pocketville—a mystery deep and puzzling.

This was what Dick thought, and his explanation of it to John Black and the Mexican relieved them greatly.

The ex-bandit knew all the chambers and passages of the old mine, and he led the fugitives to one of the former, in which a cot was at once made ready, composed of blankets they had brought, and the still unconscious Della Darington laid thereon.

Bidding Florette remain with their captive, after Dick Dirk had arranged torches to light up the cave-chamber, back Don Diablo and Dick follow him.

John Black had resolved to risk his life, in securing the body of his brother.

We will merely state here, that, with the aid of his confederates, John brought Bill's corpse to a branching passage of the mine, and there placed it temporarily.

Before daylight, the three men had also succeeded in conveying the camp-chest, and the

baggage of the two maidens, to the cave. Then, greatly fatigued, they partook of a cold lunch; and the men lay down to sleep, Florette keeping guard.

Dick Dirk slept but a short time, however. He then arose, went to the end of the shaft, and there, secreted on the shelf, watched keenly the scene below, and gazed suspiciously down the shelf toward the town.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DISCOVERY.

BRIGHT and early on the morning that followed the events related, four horsemen left the town, and rode leisurely up the stage-trail. The party consisted of the Daringtons, father and son, Cache Carl, and Bentley Bowen, *alias* "Mountain Misery."

The last mentioned was really, as had been stated, almost exactly alike in form and feature to the Blacks, having escaped being hanged for Bill Black, the previous evening, only by the timely arrival of Ugalala the Ute, bringing with him the real criminal.

David Darington had not yet recovered from the terror and excitement of the night. He was pale and wild-eyed, and plainly, great anxiety was preying upon his mind; and this was to be detected, also, in the face of his son, Dash Dare.

This was in regard to the safety of Della.

It was possible that a presentiment of the true state of affairs ruled their minds. At any rate, they had good reason to distrust John Black, whom they had left in Denver. His perfidious character had been made plain enough to them.

What would have been their state of mind, had they known that their darling had, but a few hours previous, been taken over that same road, drugged to insensibility; and that, in the same state, she still lay in a gloomy cave-chamber, up the range?

What would have been the emotions of Dash Dare, as he gazed up to that rocky shelf from the foot-hills, and explained to the others, how he had seen his father, the Indian and Mountain Misery, whom he had supposed to be Bill Black, and also the bodies of Brooks and Saunders as they lay upon the rocky projection—what would have been his feelings, had he known that they were now gazing upon the black spot which marked the entrance to the old shaft within which Della was held a captive by the brother of the very miscreant whom they had hunted to death?

And this dread truth was soon to be made known to them.

It seemed impossible for John Black to have accomplished any villainy during their short absence. He could not know of the defeat and death which had overtaken his brother. He certainly had been firm in the belief that Bill would work the plot successfully.

If the departure of Dashiell Darington became known to John, which was doubtful, the latter would not dream that the youth had gone to Pocketville. There would not seem to have been any occasion for his going.

John Black would consider it impossible for Dash to become aware of the intentions of Bill; he therefore, would suspect nothing, and would not think of plotting against the peace and safety of Della Darington.

Thus both the father and son had argued; and yet, for all that, they were greatly worried, although neither of them betrayed his apprehensions to the other.

They had refused to accompany Cache Carl to the mesquite, to ascertain if the corpse of Bill Black had been molested. They had no desire to look again upon the revolting spectacle.

As all were in haste, both Cache Carl and Mountain Misery had kept on north, up by the side of the range, with the Daringtons. In this way they had made a great mistake, for otherwise they would have discovered the ambulance, and would have known the sad truth earlier.

But we will now speak of Cache Carl; last, but not least—at any rate, in stature.

He was a young man of gigantic form, and seemingly strong in proportion.

He had blue eyes and long wavy hair, the latter somewhat sunburnt, as was also his jolly face. He was the kind of man that dogs run to at first sight, upon whom babes smile, and to whom they hold out their hands.

All other men knew him, at sight, to be noble-hearted, and as honest as the day was long.

His face was boyish, and beaming with fun and good will to all; but, quick as a flash of light, its expression could change, and he would become a very lion in wrath, filled with venge-

ful fury at the wrongs inflicted upon the innocent and helpless by bad men.

He was especially noted for hunting down criminals, and was the dreaded enemy of the "crooked." All this was for the good of society, and to promote justice; not with any expectation of reward. Such was the Chico giant.

All had drawn rein at the very point where Dash Dare had seen the terrible tableau the previous night, on his way to Pocketville from Denver. David Darington shuddered, as he gazed up the perpendicular side of the gulch wall, down which he had so miraculously escaped being hurled.

"His war a tip-top night fur Col'rado an' fur yeou, too, Mister Darin'ton," burst out Cache Carl; "fur yeou escaped bein' rubbed out, got yer money O. K., an' we-uns strung up a limb ther crookedest cuss ever tramped ther dirt o' this hyer territory!"

"He warn't fittin' fur ter breathe God's pure atmospear, he warn't! His heart, ef he hed any bleed-mersheen, war es black es ther name he wore last. He war called ther 'Devil o' ther Divide,' down range, a few years back; an' ef ther devil ain't got a clutch onter him now, then I don't see the use o' keepin' a devil nobow."

"I say, Mount'in Mis'ry, whar'd Mister Darin'ton be now, ef it hedn't been fur yeou an' thet white red-skin? Why, smashed all up on yunder rocks; fur nobuddy would ha' knowed whar ye'd skuted to, an' Black would ha' levanted down ther range w' ther boodle."

"You forget that I was in the programme," said Mountain Misery. "Had it not been for Ugalala, I, too, would be a mangled corpse on yon projection."

"Come ter recomber ther hull sarcum-stance, thet would ha' been ther case," agreed Carl. "When one comes ter take all ther cussedness o' thet Bill Black inter consideration, he warn't human. He war wuss nor a blood-suckin', scalp-clawin' 'Pache, fur they war brung up ter it an' never hed no civerlizin'. I jist feel like I c'u'd flop my wings an' crow, when I think we gut ther best o' ther black skunk!"

"We'd orter planted him, pards. His car-kiss'll p'ison ther air, c'lar up an' down ther range!"

As if suddenly recalling their haste, and experiencing anew the anxiety they had cast aside for a moment, Dash Dare and his father had returned toward the stage trail.

Dick Dirk had stolen out to the shelf, from the old mine, as has been mentioned, for the very purpose of ascertaining if Darington and his son—he having heard Dash spoken of, had indeed known of his arrival at Pocketville—would return that morning to Denver.

He had waited long and, observing no one, had returned into the shaft, where he remained for some time.

It so happened that our four friends turned from the stage road to view the scene of the last night's tragedy at the very time that Dick was within the mine; the latter not returning to his post of observation until the quartette of horsemen had ridden back to the road and passed up the same a considerable distance.

Had the ex-outlaw remained he would have been dumfounded, if not filled with the most superstitious terror. He would, perhaps, have believed that all four were ghosts, for Mountain Misery, to his vision, would have been Bill Black and no other.

We shall see, later on, whether the absence of Dick Dirk from his lookout was to be favorable to our friends or their enemies.

After reaching the stage-road the four equestrians galloped toward Denver; the father and son riding side by side in the lead, Cache Carl and Bentley Bowen, *alias* "Mountain Misery," brought up the rear, there being some distance between the two couples.

The pair who rode behind kept up a running conversation, the principal subject being the occurrences of the night, and the connection of Mountain Misery with Bill Black in years past, when the latter had robbed him of his all, and then shot him, leaving him for dead near Santa Fe.

Something like three miles had they traveled since leaving Pocketville, when suddenly Dash Dare halted and leaned over in his saddle, his eyes fixed intently on the road.

He was silent for a moment; then he cried out in apparent anguish:

"Oh, this is too much! Oh, Della, Della! why did I leave you unprotected?"

"For God's sake, what is the matter with you, Dashiell?" implored his father, spurring up beside him.

"This night has been too much for you, my

boy, and you had a terrible gallop of it yesterday."

Dash turned his face, pale as that of the dead, toward his father. There was a pitying expression mingled with his evident agony. Then he sprang to the ground, throwing the reins to his parent, and sunk upon his hands and knees in the dust of the road.

Cache Carl and Bentley Bowen spurred up rapidly, not knowing what to think of the youth's singular actions.

"Lord love yer, leetle pard! What hev struck yer?"

Thus exclaimed the giant mountaineer.

His companion gazed first at Dash and then at Darington in great perplexity.

The youth noticed them not.

He arose quickly and ran a few paces up the road, sinking again to the earth, and scanning it closely.

"He's found 'sign' thet sorter makes him wilt," asserted Carl; "but what in thunder kin be up now?"

They were not left long in suspense, however, for young Darington, with a shrill yell of vengeance, bounded back beside his horse, and into his saddle, whirling his steed about and facing toward Pocketville.

One more pitying look he gave at his father.

The young man's face was stamped with anguish unspeakable.

Then he cried out:

"Back to Pocketville, pards! John Black is not in Denver. He has stolen my sister and carried her down the range! Follow me, to rescue and revenge!"

Had not Mountain Misery spurred up beside David Darington at that moment, the poor man would have fallen from his horse, at the terrible assertion of his son.

"How does yer know this?" demanded Cache Carl.

"I know the trail of our ambulance!" yelled Dash, frantically. "On to revenge and rescue!"

Dash Dare drove deep his spurs, his horse flying like an arrow from the bow, down the road; the youth bent over in his saddle, his keen eyes seeking the stamp on the road of the mark he had, providentially, in an idle moment, cut on a tire of the wagon.

Dash, in his dread anxiety for Della, his conscience upbraiding him for leaving her in Denver, had forgotten his poor father; but Mountain Misery led the horse of the old man, encouraging him by well chosen words. But David Darington scarcely heard him.

He was almost stunned when the dread import of the discovery made by his son was fully realized.

Cache Carl galloped headlong after Dash Dare, all speeding back to Pocketville, the town from which they had set out less than an hour before.

CHAPTER VII.

TURNING BACK FOR GOOD LUCK.

It was a very easy matter to follow the trail of the ambulance, as the dew that fell on the evening previous had dampened the dust, causing the wheels to leave a well-defined impression; and, as our friends had kept in a horse trail that led alongside of the road, that of the ambulance had not been marred in the least.

Before passing half the distance between the point at which Dash had made his startling discovery and the town, strong evidence was not wanting to prove that the young man had been correct as far as regarded the ambulance of his father having passed over the stage-road to Pocketville, or possibly further down the range, during the night.

This proof was detected by Cache Carl, and it was neither more nor less than the pair of noble black horses, which were observed among the scattering mesquites to the east of the road. The animals had recovered from their fright, and were now cropping the mesquite beans from such limbs as they could reach; their heads being checked up preventing them from grazing.

"Look yunder, leetle pard!" cried Cache Carl. "What d'yer make o' thet pa'r o' nags in harness? I reckon we'd better 'vestergate."

Without a word, although the giant mountaineer saw the youth start and clutch his hand around the butt of his revolver, Dash Darington turned his horse toward the pair of blacks pointed out by Carl.

Both reached the mesquites at nearly the same time, the steeds saluting each other.

A single glance proved to the riders that the horses before them had been driven terribly during the past night, for their coats were cov-

ered with dry foam; and the harness was also in a filthy condition, from the dust and perspiration.

The wagon-pole, or about two-thirds of the same, still remained fast to the harness, and had cut and bruised the animals in their mad run since their fright.

"Thank God!" burst from Dash Dare; a deep feeling of relief being strongly manifested.

"What's up wi' yer, Dash? What d'yer mean? Does yer know ther nags? An' ef so, why air yer glad to find 'em in thet fix?"

"Hit 'pears es though somebuddy got hurted when they smashed things an' stompeded."

"Cache Carl," said the young man, "those are our horses. I knew I was right all the time, but there is proof positive that will convince father and all of you. Don't you see why I am rejoiced?"

"Those animals were hitched to my father's ambulance. John Black stole the outfit to carry away my sister, and, as the horses wrecked the vehicle, of course the villain cannot continue on down the range. You see, then, we have a short trail before us."

"We'll rescue Della—I swear it!—and hang John Black by the side of his demon brother Bill!"

At that instant, David Darington and Bentley Bowen reached the scene, and the former recognized his horses. Up to this time he had hoped that Dash had been mistaken.

He was now bewildered.

It had not seemed to him possible that John Black could have abducted Della.

For that matter, there were as yet no proofs that such was the case. It was only suspicion, though well founded.

Black would not have stolen the team and ambulance, except for the purpose of carrying Miss Darington away.

From the fact that the "outfit" had been stolen from the stables at the mansion, it would seem that the scoundrel had gone in and taken complete possession. It was very certain that no one else could have taken the horse and vehicle.

There was little doubt in the minds of the father and brother that their loved one had been abducted. Yet they still strove to think otherwise.

The horses were quickly stripped of their harness by the young mountaineer, and allowed free range; the harness being hung upon a tree.

David Darington and his son could not keep their eyes off them.

Had those steeds borne their darling from her home?

And, if so, had she been injured when the animals had wrecked the vehicle, and ran away?

Then, what could it have been that had occasioned their fright?

They were not easily startled.

Such were the thoughts that simultaneously agitated the minds of Dashiell Darington and his father.

Mountain Misery, otherwise Bentley Bowen, had listened to every word that was spoken, but he said nothing. He had left his hermit life behind him, and new hopes and fresh impulses were now ruling him. But a few hours of this changed life had he led, and the contrast caused him to think he must have been insane while living alone in caves, or in his hut in the mountain range above Pocketville.

But little time was spent with the horses. All felt that every moment was precious.

Cache Carl glanced pityingly at the old man and his son, as he sprang into his saddle. It was, indeed, a case to create sympathy in the breast of any true man; and both Carl and Bowen were infuriated to a terrible extent against John Black, who, it seemed, must be equally as depraved a miscreant as his brothers.

But was poor Della Darington now in that wretch's power?

This remained to be proved.

Dash Dare had changed from mad action to apathetic silence. At last, the young Chico giant called out to him:

"Take up ther trail, boyee! Thar's no time fer ter throw away. We'll git some more 'sign' afore soon. Ef yer sis hev bin tuck by John Black, we'll skin ther cuss alive!"

"Git fer ther road, an' ther trail! Ole man"—this to the elder Darington—"don't go fer ter worritate yerself, or yer'll make ther biz drag. Brace up, an' keep yerself ready fer ter claw John Black!"

Before Carl had ceased speaking, all had returned to the road, when Dash, at a gallop, took up the trail.

On they rode in silence, with determination and resolve plainly imprinted upon their set

features. Nearly to the town they galloped, before the trail of the ambulance left the road, and upon the grass showed less "sign," although it was still easily followed.

When all at length realized that the team had been headed directly toward the spot where Bill Black had been hanged, they were completely nonplused, for it really seemed as if John Black had gotten word of the fate of his brother. But a second thought proved this to be impossible.

Still, it was passing strange that one brother should be thus led, by mere chance, directly to the corpse of the other.

The wrecking of the wagon had been most providential, if Della had been in reality within it. This they all decided; and they began to feel that the fates were favoring the unfortunate maiden.

Then, upon the minds of all, except David Darington, as they drew near to the fatal mesquite, flashed an explanation of the fright of the horses and the wreck of the ambulance.

It had been the suspended corpse of Bill Black swaying in the breeze.

This indicated, if not proved, that the occupants of the vehicle, although it had been guided directly to the scene of the execution, could have known nothing of it previously.

Indeed, it was absurd to suppose that they could have done so.

This being the case, the occupants of the conveyance must have been even more appalled and startled than the horses.

Great would be John Black's desire for revenge now.

So our four friends concluded.

"Thar hit be!" exclaimed Cache Carl. "Hit war a short trail, an' I'm powerful glad of it. Now, Dash, pull up, an' I'll gin' a yell fer Ugalala."

"What do you want of the Indian now?" inquired the young man.

"What ther red can't nose out in ther way o' sign, ain't wo'th knowin'. Le's all glide off, slide ter dirt an' tie our critters."

Agreeably to the giant's proposition, all dismounted, leaving their horses at some distance from the motte of mesquites.

They did not wish to ride near the scene—thus, perhaps, destroying "sign" that would be of great service. They had halted at the northeast of the motte, and could see plainly the front of Red-Eye Roost; and, at the very moment they glanced toward the town, Ugalala, the Ute, strode out from the door of the just-mentioned hostelry.

The Indian flashed one sweeping glance around.

The sun had arisen, but so late had the citizens been up the past night, and so fatiguing had been their exertions in searching for Bill Black and his intended victim, Darington, to say nothing of deep potations which had induced somnolency, that all had slept much later than was usual with them.

As the Ute appeared, the watchers noticed that he had an entirely new rig; his buckskin breeches, red shirt, and even his hat—which last was furnished with fresh feathers—having been presented to him by his white pard, Mountain Misery, previous to the departure of the latter with his friends for Denver.

A revolver and bowie were in his belt—presents from David Darington—and a fine pair of high-topped boots from Dash. The valuable services rendered by Ugalala in securing Bill Black had been duly recognized.

Altogether Red-Eye, as reconstructed, presented quite a respectable appearance in comparison with what had been his for many moons past; that is, of a ragged and besotted hummer.

Not the least remarkable, however, was the plainly evidenced fact that he was now sober, clear-headed, and clear-eyed.

"Dang my duds!" exclaimed Cache Carl; "fer ther Lord's sake, look et thet red! I'll bet my butes he hain't h'isted a drap o' p'ison this hyer mornin'."

The Chico giant then cleared his throat, and shot out a far-reaching and terrific war-whoop, that echoed and re-echoed afar up the range, through chasm and cleft, gorge and cavern.

Instantly a horde of miners rushed out of Red-Eye Roost, and from shanties here and there, while Ugalala strode directly toward the spot where stood the quartette of returned travelers.

Proudly the red chief marched up to the group in which were Mountain Misery and Cache Carl, whom he so much respected.

With the exception of a joyous light in his eyes, the Indian's stoical face betrayed no surprise or emotion, although he must have been not a little astonished.

"How, how, how-dy?" he said, extending his

hands. "Ugalala glad see. Heap glad white brothers come back."

The young mountaineer pointed to the deserted ambulance.

"Dang ef yer doesn't seem ter sleep sound hyer, Ugalala! Lord love yer, we-uns struck a hot trail, an' thar's ther eend on it."

"Thar's more hellishness scattered 'roun' Pocketville than yer hes come up with till yit, an' we-uns needs another lasso. Bill Black air lonesome, an' his brother hev come ter keep him company."

"Savey, Ugalala?"

"Jist put yer peepers ter work et extra biz, an' study out ther 'sign' over thar with a few fleetin' periods."

The Indian said not a word.

He was evidently alarmed at finding that an ambulance had been so near, and that some dark doings had apparently been going on without his having been aware of it.

The miners, as soon as their surprise had subsided, rushed out *en masse* to ascertain what had brought the four horsemen back so soon to the burg.

By a single sweeping gesture Carl directed their gaze to the spot where the horses were tied, at the same time calling out:

"Wait a bit, boyees, until ther red an' yer most 'bedient finds out what's up yunder! I tell yer, pards o' Pocketville, thar's more fun ahead, er I'm ther boss liar o' Col'rado, an' don't yer fergit it!"

The citizens had paused while the Chico giant was speaking, and would have given a wild cheer, but the expression upon the faces of the other three men betrayed to them that something important and most serious, if not tragic, had occurred—something out of the common, indeed, to thus have caused their return.

Then they crowded around the trio, everything being explained by Dash Dare, while Cache Carl and Ugalala searched in and about the ambulance.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE UTE ON THE TRAIL.

THE men of the mines were astounded at the intelligence in regard to the brother of the man they had hanged.

It seemed so strange and mysterious, that John Black, who had been left in Denver, should have arrived so soon after the tragic end of his brother, and bring with him the ambulance and horses of that brother's intended victim. Especially amazing was it, for the reason that it had been clearly impossible for John to have heard from Bill.

But Mountain Misery suggested that John Black had no doubt arranged with Bill previously to meet him, after David Darington had been robbed and murdered, and that he was to bring with him Darington's daughter. This seemed very reasonable, and Dash Dare himself thought that probably there had been such an agreement.

Some remarked that there was no proof that Miss Darington had been in the vehicle, nor John Black either, for that matter. But these were soon satisfied that Dash had judged correctly in the matter.

A signal from Carl to the youth, now caused him to hasten to the ambulance.

He had been on thorns, so to speak, since reaching the scene of the wreck; but he had known that his friends would progress better without him, as both were experienced trailers. At once Dash hastened to the side of Cache Carl, and the Indian joined them.

"Keep sort o' shady fer a minute, Dash," directed Carl. "Yer war kerrect es 'gards ther cuss, John Black, fer ther corpus o' Bill hev bin tuck away!"

"Hit won't do ter tell ther boyees jist yit. They'll be rearin' tearin' mad, an' kick up too much rumpus. Gaze yunder. Ther rope war cut clean off. John Black ain't by hisself, neither."

"Waal, Ugalala, what does ther sign tell yer?"

The Indian had been busy, gliding here and there around the vehicle and the scene of the execution, as well as examining the interior of the ambulance.

Dash Dare was very pale, and his features were drawn with an agony which caused Carl great grief to witness.

The young man had been confident that Della had been abducted, that John Black had been in charge of the stolen ambulance; but, each proof of the truth of his worst apprehensions increased his agony of mind.

"Look!" said the Ute, pointing down beside the ambulance. "Got heavy box. Make hole

in dirt when take out wagon. Ugalala see heap 'sign.' So many men here"—extending three fingers. "So many white squaws"—two fingers.

"Blest ef yer ain't es keen es a bowie-blade, Ugalala," said Carl. "How in ther dickens d'yer find out so much in a flicker o' minutes? What d'yer think, Dash?"

The face of young Darington expressed the greatest astonishment.

He had not the slightest idea who the other two men could be, or who the second female was. There could be no doubt that one of them was Della.

Had he entertained but the slightest hope to the contrary, it would now have been dissipated, for the Indian produced a gay ribbon of curious coloring, which Dash knew to be his sister's, and also a gold breast-pin which had become detached with it.

"White squaw in wagon," asserted the savage. "When horses jump quick, get head hurt. Blood in wagon, see!"

Dash set his teeth hard at these words. Harrowing pictures passed in panoramic array before his mind's eye; his sister being the central figure in the imagined views. He felt that he must be up and doing, or his brain would burst.

The mental worry, through which the youth had already gone, had unfitted him for this new and unexpected mind torture in regard to the sister he so idolized.

"Great Goliath! I can't stand this hyer biz no longer," burst out Cache Carl. "Now, Dash, don't yer go fer to worrit, or yer'll tangle my head-gear. I'll tear ther hull range open ter find yer leetle sister. I will, so help me Bob!"

"Thet cuss, John Black, ain't a-goin' ter win his game, no more'n Bill did his'n. But I shall bu'st plum open ef we-uns don't drap onter ther trail purty soon. Whar d'yer s'pose they glided to, Ugalala?"

"Hide in rocks. No have much time go far. We find. Then John Black get bang too."

"Bet yer hull systematics ther cuss'll dangle, an' thet high up, too. Ef we kin find ther corpus, we'll tie 'em together, an' gin' John a slow trip over ther range."

"Le's circle ther hull biz. I'll start hyer, goin' 'roun' ther motte, an' yeou creep 'long this side. Dash kin take a peep inter ther wagon. Yer mought diskiver somethin', boyee."

The crowd of miners kept their places, carefully watching the giant scout and his Ute pard, as, on hands and knees, they scrutinized every inch of ground around the abandoned ambulance.

Suddenly the Indian sprang erect, with a yell of exultation, and, extending arm and finger, pointed toward the range, at a location above the town, saying:

"Trail lead that way. Ugalala he find."

He then ran swiftly past the crowd of men, and directly toward the base of the range; but, before reaching the bordering bushes, he stopped and examined the ground again. Soon he appeared to have regained the trail, for he passed on to the verge of the mingled trees, shrubbery and vines that grew amid the stones and big boulders.

He stood there a moment, and then plunged into the thicket. Ere long, however, he reappeared, circling his arm above his head, and with a small piece of bright-colored cloth in his hand.

Dash Dave had watched the chief with a fixed gaze, knowing how much depended upon him.

Carl had arisen, as soon as his red pard yelled, and stood with his arms folded, he also following Ugalala with his eyes. Indeed, the gaze of the crowd was riveted upon the red trailer. When the latter appeared, as has been stated, Dash bounded toward him, as did also Carl. The Ute passed the shred of cloth to young Darington, saying:

"Find on bush. White squaw wear. Mebbe so Dash Dare sister."

"Great heavens!" exclaimed the young man; "the villain has got Florette also! At least poor Della is not alone in her dread extremity."

"Then yer knows ther caliker?" interrogated the giant.

"Yes, this is a piece of the dress worn by my sister's maid. We're on the trail now. Nothing can keep me from my vengeance!"

"Hold on, Dash! Don't be too speedy. Ther boyees hev waited with patience, an' they must know ther hull biz."

Carl then turned toward the crowd, and called out:

"Pards o' Pocketville! We-uns salerwated Bill Black last night, fer tryin' ter wipe out an' rob Mister Darin'ton, who war brunged hyer by

ther cuss a-purpose, Saunders an' Brooks bein' in cahoots wi' Black.

"Now, I tells yer, Bill's brother John stoled ther nags an' amberlance o' Mister Darin'ton, et Denver, an' stole his darter an' her waitin' gal; fotchin' 'em fer ter meet Bill, I reckon. They comed up ter whar Bill's corpus war a-hangin', an' tha'r critters took skeer, snapped ther pole, an' stompeded, makin' bit onpossible fer John Black ter go on down range."

"Pards, tha'r's two young an' innercent gals up 'mong ther rocks somewhar, John Black havin' captivated 'em. Now, what we-uns hes gut ter do air ter snake ther cuss bald-headed, an' save ther caliker."

"We hes bin insulted. John Black hes throwed mud in our faces. Look at thet mesquite. Ther cuss hev tuck the corpus o' his brother 'way from ther men o' ther mines."

Cache Carl tore off a chew of tobacco from a plug, which he jerked viciously from his pouch. A loud yell burst from the mob.

No greater insult could have been put upon them, as a community, than to cut down a criminal whom they had dispatched.

Vengeful whoops and fierce ejaculations shot from their lips.

At that moment the Indian gave a signal and pointed up the stage trail. All turned quickly and beheld a horseman approaching at break-neck speed; the animal being flecked with foam, wild-eyed, and evidently uncontrollable.

The rider was hatless and his head was bald. All were amazed.

David Darington, broken in spirit, and overwhelmed with the avalanche of misery that had come upon him, had seated himself at the foot of a tree, the very picture of hopeless despair. But the loud whoop of the Indian attracted him, and looking up, he beheld the horseman.

At first, the sight of the new-comer seemed to render Darington powerless to speak or move, but as the horse drew nearer, and the old man's eyes rested upon the animal, he staggered to his feet.

"Stop him!" he cried. "Stop that horse! That's my poor brother, Dudley. Dash, where are you? Here's your uncle! Oh, what is to come upon us next?"

But, Dash Dare had also recognized his simple-minded relative, and was also dumfounded; for he knew Dudley had never before bestrode a horse in his life, nor ever traveled a mile alone.

"Spread out, pards, an' stop ther critter! Thet cuss hed orter be kep' in a cage. Jist look, boyees—jist look! Hyer he comes, on a lightnin' stampede. He's bringin' his own telegraph from Denver, 'bout ther Black biz. He'll bu'st we-uns all up!"

And a most singular spectacle Dudley Darington presented, sure enough; for he clutched the saddle-horn with one hand and a mass of the horse's mane with the other; the bridle reins flying free, as were the stirrups. Poor Dudley's eyes were protruding, his cheeks were hollow, and as pale as death. He was the very personification of abject terror, and the horse seemed nearly as much frightened as his rider.

Straight toward the crowd, which now formed a semicircle, the animal dashed; and all believed that, did they stop him, the man would be hurled over his neck.

"Sing ther mounting sockdolager, pards!" yelled Carl; "I'll catch him on ther fly!"

And sing the men of the mines did; but, such a song!

Whoops, yells, shrieks and screams came from every throat; while all leaped up and down, and a shower of hats was shied at the head of the terrified horse.

Up in air the animal bounded, and then landed firm on braced hoofs, stationary, but trembling in every nerve.

Dudley Darington was shot through the air, like a projectile from a catapult; but Carl, with the most correct calculation, placed himself at such a distance directly in front of the horse, as deftly to catch Dudley, when he knew the great momentum of the man would be lessened sufficiently for him to stand the shock.

Deftly the giant caught him, crying out, as he did so—

"How-dy, Mister Darin'ton? We're all glad ye're come. Hyer ye air, direck from Denver, on ther Shoo-fly buzz! Ten fleetin' periods fer 'freshmints, an' yer needs 'em, an' needs 'em bad."

"Keep cool, er yer ha'r'll never grow ag'in. Dang my duds, ef ther 'Paches hain't gin' him ther keenest scalpin' I ever see'd!"

The cheers of the crowd prevented the greater part of Carl's greeting to the stranger from being heard; and it was just as well, for the giant would not have cared to have Dash or his father hear him.

CHAPTER IX.

A BAD SPECTACLE.

JOHN BLACK had not the remotest idea when he cautioned Dick Dirk and Don Diablo against betraying the fact to Florette that her father had met an ignominious death, that the girl had observed their whispering, or had caught a word uttered by them.

But Florette was very keen-witted. She was naturally watchful and suspicious of all with whom she became associated. And when, on such an expedition as this upon which she had, with such little preparation, been forced, she was bent upon knowing everything that transpired, however trivial.

Besides, she knew that her uncle, John Black, had not the executive ability necessary for desperate enterprises, that he had always been guided, and indeed governed, by her father.

Therefore it was that she feared disaster, and it came sooner than expected, in the wrecking of the ambulance, which was something for which she could not account. It seemed very strange to Florette that two men could not control a pair of horses; and she could not understand how, or why, the team had been allowed to escape.

The hasty explanation of her uncle—a fabrication of his—did not satisfy her.

She had, for some time, been rendered senseless by the shock, as she was hurled against the camp chest with considerable force, and she knew nothing of the fright which John and Don Diablo had experienced.

That some mystery was connected with the accident, she was positive.

When she regained her senses a strange man was present, and Florette had a strong suspicion that he was in some way connected with the wrecking of the ambulance. Yet it seemed absurd that her uncle could be friendly with this Dick Dirk, had such been the case.

The girl had understood, from what was said, that Dick belonged in Pocketville; yet, when she questioned him in regard to her father and Dash Dare, he had asserted that he knew nothing of either of them. His speech and manner, however, convinced her that the man was trying to deceive her.

When Florette Forbes, in her sly manner, had watched, and listened, and cast furtive glances at the three men, previous to their departure from the ambulance, she detected her uncle, when he spoke to the others in regard to their being careful not to speak of the tragic end of his brother.

She caught the words—"Florette must not know it."

But Florette determined that she *would* know it—whatever it was that they were keeping from her.

She feared that her father had been defeated in his scheme to secure the money of David Darington. She had no idea of any plot of his beyond that. She had not dreamed that Bill Black intended to murder his partner.

Her father, she now imagined, must have been forced to flee from Pocketville, or otherwise John would have found some means of communicating with him.

Florette could get no satisfaction from any of the men as to what was going on in the town, although she was confident they must know if anything unusual had happened.

She was greatly worried, also, when she thought of Dash Dare.

Well she knew that, did the young man discover her relationship to William Black, and that she had been a party to the abduction of his sister, he would hate and abhor her.

In this state of mind was Florette Forbes in the cave-chamber, where she had been left in charge of Della Darington, while the men returned to the ambulance for more of such articles as were necessary for their comfort. By this time she had become extremely anxious about Della, who remained in a semi-comatose condition as at the first.

In a little time, however, she merged from this lethargic state into a natural sleep.

Florette had always hated the rich and petted girl, for being her superior in education and social station.

Besides this, she knew that the beauty of Della Darington was of a more refined type than her own. She was painfully conscious that her blood was tainted with a Mexican mixture, and that her father, although a pure-blooded Caucasian, was not only swarthy and coarse in feature, but was a murderous outlaw, and was now living under an assumed name.

Indeed, Florette herself had so many surnames that she knew not which of them belonged by right to her.

It was very gloomy, tiresome and lonely in that rock-bound apartment, with a sleeping captive; and Florette resolved that she would inspect the underground retreat in the vicinity of the cave, if no further.

To make sure of finding Della there when she returned, she bound the poor girl's wrists and ankles with a silken sash, which she cut in two for that purpose. Before, however, she had made up her mind to this, John Black and his two men had returned with the trunk and camp-chest from the ambulance, and she could not understand why they had again gone from the range in the same direction.

Taking a torch, her former suspicions being brought to mind, she determined to crouch in one of the passages, and listen to the men when they again returned. In the darkness she could reach the cave-chamber without being observed by them.

Florette first made herself familiar with the winding passage from the cave to the main shaft of the old mine, leaving a torch midway.

Then, behind an abrupt bend in the passage she crouched, awaiting developments.

Ere long she heard the trio coming along the outer shelf.

They entered the shaft, which was perfectly dark, and Florette knew by their tread that two of them were carrying a heavy burden of some kind.

What could it be?

There had been nothing left in the ambulance of any weight, or indeed that was worth bringing to the cave.

What were Don Diablo and Dick Dirk bearing between them, and why did they endeavor to move noiselessly and speak in such suppressed whispers?

They did not enter the passage that led to the cave-chamber, but turned into another to the right of it, and there John Black ignited a pine torch, and all passed cautiously along the passage.

Florette rushed to the entrance and peered into and along it. She caught a flitting view of two men carrying a burden, but as one walked behind the other, she could not for the life of her, tell what it was.

Fearing that Dick and the Mexican would at once return and discover her, the young girl hastened back to the cave in which she had left Della. She unbound the wrists and ankles of the captive, and then, seating herself on the couch, awaited the appearance of the men.

But she had resolved that on the first opportunity she would again repair to that passage, and ascertain what it was that had been so stealthily deposited there.

Florette felt a strange and unaccountable fascination drawing her toward that gloomy natural corridor, down which the three men had so slowly marched, and her blood chilled, while a feeling akin to horror took possession of her as she thought of the mysterious burden.

Yet she could not account for this feeling, and had not the slightest idea what the character of the thing thus conveyed could be.

Soon John Black, Don Diablo, and Dick Dirk entered the cave, and at once threw themselves upon blankets, with a lunch in their hands. This they ate quickly, and then seemed to drop into a deep sleep.

Florette had sunk prostrate and feigned slumber when they came in, thinking some words might be spoken by them which would throw light on the mystery, or inform her as to what had taken place in Pocketville. But not a syllable was spoken.

This impressed the girl greatly, and increased her suspicions that something was wrong—that something of great importance to herself had occurred, of which they knew, but were withholding it, for some reason, from her.

She soon became aware that Dick Dirk was restless, and evidently far from being asleep. She, therefore, feared to begin exploring the passage. But, in a little time, Dick arose and passed out of the cave-chamber.

Quickly and silently Florette followed, guided by his torch.

But she was disappointed.

He did not turn into the passage she so much wished to inspect; but, as he passed it, he shuddered, and quickened his gait. This she could not help noticing.

He advanced to the entrance of the shaft, threw down his torch, and went out into the open air.

All was darkness where Florette now found herself; only one bright spot ahead revealing the locality of the mouth of the shaft.

The girl was in a perilous position!

She felt uncertain about regaining the cham-

ber in the darkness, but she nevertheless made the attempt and succeeded. She then knew that she could find her way back again. She knew, too, that her opportunity had arrived.

Dick Dirk had placed himself on guard, through anxiety for their safety.

Of this she felt confident.

Procuring a number of matches and a pine-knot, Florette retraced her steps, soon reaching again the point from which she had so recently turned back.

She could see the gray glow which showed the entrance to the shaft, and she knew very nearly where the passage was located which she so wished to inspect. Feeling along the wall, she soon reached it, and entered; but she feared to light the torch until she had gone some distance, lest Dick should detect it.

Slowly she proceeded, her delicate hands being bruised, as she nervously felt her way along.

Wishing to make sure that Dick Dirk would not know of her presence, she continued on in the darkness.

Suddenly her foot struck against some object which lay in the passage, and which was more yielding than the rock.

Florette felt confident that she had found the burden that Don Diablo and Dick had brought into the shaft.

She stooped, and groped with her hands, and felt clothing!

But, there was something within that clothing—something that was cold to the touch, and hard, and rigid!

The young girl was, for a time, almost paralyzed with dread. She could not so much as breathe, as her warm hand came in contact with the clammy face of a human being!

She knew it was a corpse.

There she knelt by it in the darkness. With trembling fingers she at last struck a match against the rock; turning her back upon the dread thing for which she had been in search. Her face was ashen, and her eyes were filled with a strange and unnatural light.

The maiden ignited the torch, and then, with great difficulty, gained her feet, still trembling.

She waited until the flame burned brightly, and while thus waiting, a perfect picture of mingled terror and resolve was presented.

It was a great display of nerve.

Quickly she turned about in her tracks.

No human being would ever wish to look upon such a sight. It was one that once seen, would never, until death, be forgotten.

There, outstretched before her, touching the very feet of Florette Forbes, was the face of her strangled father, hideous in death!

It was a sight too revolting and horrible for even a stranger to look upon. What, then, must it have been to a young girl, and she the daughter of the dead?

Alone, with a flickering torch, in that subterranean passage, far from the light of day and God's fresh air—there stood the wretched Florette, looking down upon that fearful thing!

She stood as if transformed to stone, rigid, and to all appearance lifeless; not a breath passing her colorless lips, and with her eyes fixed in an awful stare upon the sightless ones of her sire!

The wonder was that she ever breathed again, that another pulsation ever stirred her breast.

But her agony had not ended.

At length, with a shriek that tore through the brain of every one in that lonely cave, and of Dick Dirk standing upon the rocky shelf—paralyzing all with the most unaccountable horror—Florette Forbes fell forward upon the cold corpse of the man who gave her being, as devoid of sense as the dead!

The torch went out.

All was dark as the grave.

Appallingly that awful shriek echoed and re-echoed through the passages, caverns, and shafts, like the wail of lost souls in Hades!

CHAPTER X.

CONSTERNATION IN CAMP.

As that fearful sound smote upon their ears, John Black and the Mexican sprang to their feet, from a deep sleep.

What could it mean?

Of one thing they felt certain.

The cry had come from some one in mortal terror.

Della Darrington also, for the first time since she had fallen asleep in her Denver home, opened her eyes.

To describe the poor girl's terror would be impossible.

From her peaceful home she had been transported into the very bowels of the earth; and

all was wild, and strange, and terrible, around and above her!

She knew by her feelings, and by the scent of the drug upon her clothing, that she had been given a powerful opiate.

By whom, was a mystery; and for what purposes, as well.

But when the maiden saw and recognized John Black, she then knew that the author of the outrage was before her.

Della shuddered from head to foot.

The abductor must, she felt, have been assisted by some person whom she had trusted. This was evident.

But now, where was she? And what would be the end of all this?

Where were her father and Dash?

What would be their feelings, when they returned to Denver, and found her gone?

But, would they ever return?

It seemed to the poor girl but too probable that Bill Black had been successful, and that all this had been planned before his departure.

Where was she now?

Near Pocketville it was more than likely, for John Black would seek to meet Bill at that point.

The two men were evidently terror-stricken at the wild cry that had aroused her. At length, however, they perceived that their captive had been awakened. John, at once, spoke:

"Tie her fast," he said to Don Diablo; "and you, Della Darrington, make no outcry, or I'll strangle you on the spot!"

The terrified maiden closed her eyes, while the Greaser, in obedience to orders, bound her, and then cast her rudely back upon the couch of blankets.

There was no time to waste.

"Santa Maria!" exclaimed the Mexican; "Senorita Florita is not here. She it must have been that gave the shriek."

John Black stared at the speaker, in open-mouthed horror and alarm.

He did not know positively, but he had strong suspicions as to who it was, and what had occasioned it.

Florette must have discovered her father's corpse.

This John decided at once; although he had not deemed it possible for her to find it, or even that she could find her way to the entrance to the shaft.

Just then Dick Dirk made his appearance. He stood for an instant, as if trying to speak, but no sound escaped his lips.

"Get a torch, and be quick about it!" ordered Black. "The girl has found her dead father—I'm positive of it!"

"Where have you been, Dick? I swear I did not miss Florette, or you either!"

"I've been on watch at the shelf," he answered; "and I never heard such a cry in all my life. I'm all in a cold perspiration now."

"Lead on!" ordered John, impatiently. "It is simply awful that she should have found the body, if she has. She's a sly one, and must have observed us bringing it into the shaft. But, I know, she could never have imagined what it was."

"Poor Bill! But we'll avenge him."

Don Diablo followed his employer and Dick Dirk, and the hopeful trio soon reached the horrid scene. Their theory, they found to be the correct one.

There lay, Florette, upon her father's corpse! "I never want to see such a sight again," said Dick; "it knocks me blind!"

"I reckon you'd better have told her, John, in the first place. It couldn't have been kept from her very long anyway. She knew Bill too well to believe he'd stay hid from her. If he was alive, she'd expect to see him."

"It would have been better, Dick. I see that now. But it is too late for regrets. I knew she'd kick up a big rumpus, and perhaps be the means in that way of betraying us into the hands of those devils in Pocketville."

"We're in a tight box here as it is. Lift her up, Dick, and take her back to the cave. Then return here. We must move poor Bill once more. Florette must not be allowed to see him again."

Dick obeyed, Don Diablo lighting his way to the cave-chamber.

Poor Della was by this time wide awake, and it was with joy that she recognized her maid. She now believed that Florette had been abducted like herself, had attempted to escape, and had given that fearful scream on being recaptured.

When John Black had spoken of his niece to Don Diablo, it was in a low tone, and Della had not caught his words.

Dick and the Greaser again withdrew. They rejoined their leader, and the body of Bill Black was removed to a narrower and more winding passage. The three then returned to the chamber.

Florette remained unconscious, and John was glad of it.

He drew his two confederates aside, out of the hearing of Della Darington, for consultation.

Then he spoke:

"Pards, we are now like so many rats in a hole, and the men at the foot of the range would hang us all if they corraled us. If they discovered us, they would smoke us out were it not for the girls.

"Upon them depend our lives if we remain, and I don't propose to run and leave—not by a large majority.

"There's big money in that Darington girl. If her father and brother could be wiped out—and both of them are in Pocketville now, I reckon—I could run a racket that would rake in a pile for us.

"Poor Bill got beat in his game. Tell me all about it, Dick! We have had no time for talk since we met."

Dick Dirk related all that he knew in connection with the death of Black's unprincipled agents, the arrival of Dash Dare in the burg, the hunt that followed, and the subsequent hanging of Bill.

John Black was furious.

How the citizens had obtained their information concerning his brother's plot was a mystery. John could not understand how it had happened that Saunders and Brooks lost their lives, and the ex-bandit knew nothing of the part that had been taken in the affair by Mountain Misery and Ugalala, the Ute.

"Well, let the past go," said Black at length. "We go in now for safety, and later for revenge and money.

"Now that Florette knows her father is dead, I'll play a game, leaving Dash Dare out as a money-making project. We'll have that young cuss's life!

"Florette, the little fool, is in love with him, I'm positive; but I'll make her believe he was the direct means of having her father hanged. Which, indeed, he was; for, had he remained in Denver everything would have gone on O. K.

"Young Darington knows nothing of the girl's relationship to Bill and me; and she can decoy him here, on the pretense of taking him to his sister, representing to him that she and Della have been abducted by me. Then we'll have him foul.

"Perhaps we can corral the old man also in the same way. If so, we'll wipe both out. So much by way of revenge.

"Then down range we'll go, and torture this Darington girl until she signs an order on her bankers in our favor, or in some such way at all events we'll get her money into our hands.

"I'll work all that when this biz is over, and done with.

"Now, Dick, do you think they can find us here? And do you reckon that old cuss and his son have gone back to Denver?"

"I wouldn't hang out here long, John, if I thought they would find us. You can just bet that, old man!

"They'd make short work of yours truly if they nabbed me—you'd better believe they would. Yes, they'd hang me right there, without trial. None of that in mine, if you please. Not for Joseph!

"As to the old man and Dash, my opinion is they'll go back home right off. It stands to reason, you see, after finding poor Bill out that they wouldn't consider the gal safe in Denver, or anywhere else where you were—don't you see?

"But everything depends on whether they find that ambulance or not, before they start. If they do, of course they'll know at once that you took the team; and they'll suspect you have the piece of calico along too, even if we left no 'sign' last night.

"There is a cute Indian in the town, a boss trailer, and he'll work things fine for them. He may run in on us here, but I'll keep a watch, and drop him sure.

"It's an easy place to defend—that's one thing in our favor—but we can't take to the rocks with the calico."

"Sa'an seize that red-skin!" said Black, fiercely. "You'll have to watch closely, Dick, and don't miss putting lead in his brain if he shows up.

"Don Diablo can keep guard when you want o come inside. It won't do to run any risks. I'll try the racket I mentioned, on Florette.

"Now let us return!"

Dick Dirk went back to his post, but while absent he had lost the chance of seeing a man very closely resembling the Black brothers in appearance.

He saw, however, the four horsemen when they halted, examined the road, and then, turning, galloped back to Pocketville.

He knew, from the gigantic size of one, that he must be Cache Carl, and he was pretty confident that the youth with the party was Dash Dare. It was evident, also, that they had discovered the trail of the ambulance.

Dick signaled Don Diablo, and informed the Mexican of what he had seen.

They then entered the old mine, to report to John Black.

CHAPTER XI.

UNCLE DUDLEY'S DISTRESS.

BOTH David Darington and his son reached the side of Cache Carl a minute after the giant had caught the strangely-arrived brother of the first-mentioned man in his arms, when the simple and terrified Dudley Darington had been hurled over the head of his gigantic steed.

Had not Dudley been a very diminutive specimen of humanity, the Chico giant, strong and muscular though he was, would not have been able to preserve his equilibrium. As it was, he received quite a shock.

This last feat of the poor man appeared to be the "last feather," for he lay in Carl's arms, limp and lifeless. The powerful young man held him as a mother would her child, regarding him with a pitying look.

"Don't fret, pards," he said to the brother and nephew as they rushed up, their faces expressing their alarm and anxiety.

"Don't worrit yourselves. He's only sorter wilted, but he'll fotch roun' O. K., presently. Thar ain't a bone broke, nor a ha'r turned criss-cross. But he an' that critter would ha' gone plum through ther range, ef we-uns hedn't bin hyer!"

"In the name of all that's wonderful!" exclaimed Dash Dare, "how did Uncle Dudley happen this way? He was never known even to mount a horse before."

"He came to inform us about poor Della," said David Darington, sadly. "Poor fellow! how he must have suffered! Surely he cannot be dead?"

The miners had gathered around the Daringtons, and Carl reassured the relatives of poor Dudley, and gave one of his characteristic lectures on patience.

Dash felt the words deeply, and knew that they were not out of place.

He extended his hand, saying:

"Don't think, Carl, that we are not thankful for all you and these gentlemen have done for us? We can never express our thanks. But, remember we have been called upon to suffer one terrible wrong and anxiety after another. The last, the tearing of my sister from her home by the miscreant, John Black, has nearly prostrated my father, and to see my uncle in this state, adds to our wretchedness."

"I don't wonder, boyee," returned Carl; "ye've hed a heap fer ter buck ag'in' o' late. But, all this gab we-uns air gittin' off, won't resky yer leetle sis. Pard's o' Pocketville, we'll soon start another man-hunt, an' we'll fotch down our game, an' then hang it up fer ter dry, ef we has ter t'ar ther hull range open!"

"No sich hellyun es Bill Black's brother shell brag thet he beat the men o' Pocketville, an' tuck a leetle gal right past ther burg—not much! Somebody fotch some bug-juice!"

A loud yell from the crowd told how eager they were to search for John Black.

The Indian and Mountain Misery had mysteriously disappeared, but all were confident that they were searching for the trail beyond the trees, up the side of the range.

Whisky was now brought from Red-Eye Roost, and poured over the head and into the mouth of Dudley Darington. The old man soon opened his eyes, but there was a strange expression in them. He appeared almost like an insane person.

When he caught sight of his brother and Dash, however, there seemed to be a more natural appearance, and he began to speak, but in a hoarse and disjointed manner:

"Della—John Black—ambulance—gone—came—tell David—"

There was nothing more that had any sense in it, although the poor old man raved almost continually, and wrung his hands.

"Poor fellow! Poor Dudley!" said his brother. "He almost worshiped Della, and never seemed happy except when in her presence. Do you think he will regain his mental balance, Dash?"

"I certainly hope he will, father. But, you had best remain here, and attend to him. You cannot be any assistance in the search; just the opposite, indeed, for you will hinder us. I must at once find Ugalala and Mountain Misery."

"Ye're givin' him solid boss sense, Dash," agreed Carl. "I'll tote yer uncle ter Red-Eye Roost, and then I'm ready ter go gunnin' arter John Black. But I won't shoot ter kill, an' cheat ther rope, an' ther boyees outen ther fun."

So saying Carl bore the old man to the hotel, and up to a chamber that Crystal Charley allotted for his use. David Darington remained to care for his unfortunate brother, for he realized that he was in no fit condition, either mentally or physically, to roam the range in quest of his lost daughter and her cowardly abductor. After placing Dudley upon a couch, Carl rushed down-stairs, calling out:

"Four fingers fer ter brace me, Charley! I gut only a flicker o' sleep last night, but I reckon I kin stand ther raffle."

"I wish I could go with you," said the bar-keeper. "You and the boys are having all the fun. It's dull for me, though."

"Don't fret, Charles," returned the giant. "When we-uns freeze onter John Black, we'll fotch him right hyer, an' hev, a jubilee with him. We won't string him up suddint like—not much! We'll tie ther rope 'round his neck, an' stake him ter ther post yunder."

"Won't we just make him git down on his marrerbones, an' beg us fer ter hang him up, outen his misery? Wa'al, I shu'd strangle ef we don't!"

"You'll have to catch your fish before you fry it, Carl," said Charley, laughing.

"An' thet's jist what I'm goin' fer ter do right now," was the reply, as he bounded to the door; yelling to the crowd of miners, who, for once in their lives, had neglected to patronize the bar of Red-Eye Roost:

"Oh, ya-as! Oh, ya-as! All ther hull caboodle o' ye! Come in lively, an' errigate yer in-ards. Then we'll scatter, an climb fer John Black."

A loud cheer for Cache Carl resounded, and a grand rush was made into the hostelry. All drank at the giant's expense, and some provided themselves with bottles.

Then, out they poured into the street headed by Carl, and proceeded at once to the point where the Indian had found the shred that had been torn, by the thorns, from Florette's dress.

Carl gave a signal for the Indian, but there was no response.

"I take it, ther red air nosin' up 'mong ther rocks wi' Mounting Misery," he suggested; "an', pards, I motions we divides inter squads. Some of us mought happen ter strike somethin' thet'll talk plain regardin' thet skunk, er ther caliker, which'll 'mount ter ther same thing."

"Ef anybody does, why let fly a shot from shooter. Ther leetle party air holed, we knows, dead sure; fer they couldn't proceed fur wi' ther gals. Yer kin jist gamble onter that."

All agreed, and the giant organized parties of half a dozen each, sending them out in different directions. This done, he himself started from the last place at which Ugalala had found trace of those of whom he was in search; and as there was no trail on the rocky path above the trees and bushes, he studied the lay of the land, calculating in his mind which portion of the mountain route would be most likely to be taken by men so situated.

If it was plainly to be seen in the face of the huge mountaineer, that he was greatly puzzled by the secret departure of Bentley Bowen and the Indian. He well knew, however, that they had acted thus for good and sufficient reasons; as, alone, they could move silently, and with all their senses on the alert; which would be impossible if others were with them.

He had himself deserted the crowd for the same reason; but he hoped to discover Ugalala and Mountain Misery, if together, or one of them if apart.

The spur of the range, at the extreme point of which, where it terminated at the big gulch, and where the winding shelf led past the old mine, was the hiding-place which Dick Dirk had selected for Black and the captives.

It had every appearance of being a safe and secure one.

It was an extensive ridge of rock, jutting out from the main range, but in a quartering manner; the range running north and south, and the ridge, or spur, breaking from it in a north-easterly direction. It was nearly a mile from this to the terminus of the ridge, above the big gulch.

Cache Carl made his way over the ridge, by easy passage, and not far from the junction of the same with the range.

He knew that one of the men who, the Indian had asserted, was in company with Black, was familiar with the mountains in the vicinity of Pocketville. Had this not been the case, the party would have proceeded further down, or up range, before seeing a hiding-place.

That they had a guide was evident, and that they had passed up the range, so near to the town, would have been proof positive of this to Cache Carl, even without Ugalala's assertion.

Nor was he without strong suspicions, as to who the man who had guided John Black was; for, he knew that the hostler of Red-Eye Roost had skipped the town, with the one idea of self-preservation. And well he might, for there had been abundant evidence that he had been aiding and abetting Bill Black, in the latter's plot to rob and murder David Darington.

Consequently, Cache Carl was thoroughly satisfied in his own mind, that Dick Dirk was now with John Black.

And, as Dick had, at one time, been engaged in the mines, and had prospected the range, until getting "flat broke" through his protracted spreeing, before taking the position of hostler in Pocketville, he must, of course, have known every hole in the mountains in that vicinity.

Carl was not nearly so well posted, but he believed that on the opposite side of the ridge there must be caverns; and, as a man stationed higher up than the ridge, on the range, could command a view of all who might approach, easily signaling to a sentinel at the place of hiding, he could not doubt that it was a very favorable locality to search.

He had purposely directed all of the miners further south.

Then, with watchfulness and care, sweeping the heights and all the surroundings with keen gaze, to catch sight or sign of Ugalala or Mountain Misery, the young giant proceeded on his way.

But we must know what became of Ugalala and Mountain Misery, the two who were most likely of any to find sign or trace of those for whom they were searching; for, as both were acquainted with the vicinity, and were at home in the mountains, but little could escape their scrutiny.

CHAPTER XII.

LOVE TO HATRED TURNED.

WE will now inform the reader of the true state of affairs in connection with the disappearance of Mountain Misery and the Ute chief. They had departed separately. Both, with the same object in their minds, had reasoned that they had a better chance of success in their search if they set out singly.

Mountain Misery took the same route that Carl afterward decided upon, and when he reached the other side of the ridge, started up along the base of the same toward the great gulch and the old mine, although he had little hope of gaining intelligence of the missing maidens.

Ugalala, however, had, since losing the trail, been pondering deeply, even when there was great excitement around him. He was satisfied that the missing hostler was with John Black, and he knew that one of the females had been carried in the arms of some one; for he detected where the man had seated himself to rest, the print of the girl's feet being visible in the soft ground alongside.

From this, the Indian was strengthened in his belief that the party had gone along the east side of the ridge; for he was certain that the man could not pass over it with the captive maiden in his arms. Knowing that one of the females had been injured in the ambulance, Ugalala came to the conclusion that she was insensible, or the man would not be carrying her.

He had not spoken of this to the others, for he had noticed how Dash Dare had been distressed when he discovered it; but, at once, he decided that the only way in which the party could proceed was on the shelf that led to the old mine, incumbered as they were.

Along this shelf, then, he stole, with all the stealthy caution of his race; examining the rocky way closely, to detect the slightest "sign" that might have been left by those whom he so wished to find.

The Indian had felt great sympathy for David Darington, and had come to regard Dash Dare very highly, although knowing the youth such a short time. He would have liked to have tortured John Black to death, after the manner of his people.

It may be seen, therefore, that the abductor had a terrible and merciless enemy on his trail, and that Della Darington had a friend who would risk his life to save her.

But, as we know, Ugalala was incurring great danger, in returning to the old mine; as Dick Dirk or Don Diablo, one or the other, would be watching for him. However, their eyes must be keen and watchful indeed, to catch a view of the red trailer before he knew of their presence.

Thus it was, that Cache Carl, Mountain Misery and Ugalala, were all pointed toward the old mine; for the former, upon finding no favorable covert or trace of John Black's party between the main range and the commencement of the ridge, made his way out, and was seen from a distance by Dash Dare, who hastened in the same direction.

But, before following up our friends, who are thus approaching the disused shaft, which each, as he recalls the existence of it, believes to be the hiding-place of those for whom he is in search, we must detail what had occurred therein. We refer, now, to the plan proposed by John Black to Don Diablo and Dick Dirk, concerning the sending of Florette to lure David Darington, or his son, or both, to the old mine—the miscreant intending to take their lives, in revenge for the hanging of his brother.

After the consultation of the trio, they returned to the couch, and carried Florette into an adjoining cavern, forming another couch for her, and at last succeeding in bringing her out of her swoon. In a dazed manner, she gazed wondering at the three men before her; not, at first, recalling the near past.

John Black waited not for her to realize the truth, but spoke at once.

"Now, Florette," he said, in an impressive voice, "do not make any fuss. We could not tell you the true state of affairs, lest in your anguish you might betray us."

"We are in great danger. You know that those devils in Pocketville accomplished your father's death?"

Then the maiden sprang to a sitting posture, clasping her hands tightly together.

The fearful sight that had met her eyes in that narrow passage was reproduced vividly before her. She groaned aloud, and shuddered in every nerve.

"There, Florette," continued her uncle; "I know it was terrible, but we concealed the fact from you for your good, as well as for our own. Now be yourself, my girl!"

"Brace up, and remember what we have to do. We have sworn that vengeance shall be ours, and you must aid us."

"Who but Dash Dare is responsible for your father's defeat and death? He found that accursed letter, and reached here in time to have my poor brother dragged by a hooting crowd to a tree, and hanged like a dog!"

"Dash Dare and his father are in Pocketville now, and they do not know that you were even acquainted with Bill and me—much less that you are his daughter. They will believe you, when you tell them that you were abducted with Della."

"Do so, and you can lead them to her rescue. Then we will settle with them. Yes, we will avenge your father! Will you do this, Florette? If so, the game must be played at once; for those infernal miners may run in on us at any moment."

Florette Forbes gazed at her uncle.

She seemed to have banished all grief, and anguish, and horror.

She appeared to have been instantly transformed from a grieving girl to an avenging tigress. In her fury, no trace was there of her witching brunette beauty. She was almost hideous.

Don Diablo and Dick Dirk actually shrunk away from the couch on which she was seated, the former muttering his invariable ejaculation:

"Santa Maria!"

John Black saw that he had won the game. His eyes glared exultantly.

As he ceased speaking, Florette sprang to her feet, and hissed:

"Show me the trail—the rocky shelf by which we came here! It leads to Pocketville, and revenge! I'll go!"

"I'll weave a net around Dashiell Darington that will strangle him, as he did my poor father! Yes, we will be avenged, Uncle John, even though they kill us afterward."

"Good!" exclaimed Black. "Now, Florette, you are yourself. Come! Everything depends upon quick movements. If we linger, revenge is lost, and we are lost."

"Shall we get a wrap and hat for you?"

"No, I have escaped without them. It will look better to be without. I could hardly be expected to make my toilet before escaping from such a gang. Ha! ha! ha! I have not lost my wits entirely, you see."

Wild and unnatural were the girl's voice and manner, and the men stared at her as if in doubt as to her being competent to perform the task they had laid out for her. But they had no thought of detaining her. Indeed they knew that to attempt to control her would be worse than useless.

The wonder was that the brain of the passionate creature had not been forever unbalanced by the shock she had experienced.

With her mother's race, it is but a step from burning love to burning hate; and the blood of her Mexican mother ruled Florette at that moment, if not at all times.

Dick Dirk led the way to the entrance of the old mine, and, without a word in reply to his hurried directions and caution, the girl proceeded along the shelf, which wound down the east side of the ridge with a gradual descent.

This was after Dick had reported to John Black his glimpse of the four horsemen on the stage-road, and their hasty return to Pocketville.

When the citizens were congregated at the east end of the line of shanties, after the discovery of the ambulance, and also when Dudley Darington arrived in such headlong haste, Florette Forbes was secreted in the thicket, near where Ugalala had discovered a rag of her dress. There she crouched until the Indian stole along the shelf trail toward the old mine, when she became greatly enraged and concerned; following after the red-skin, as she feared he would discover their hiding-place, and betray the party to the men of the mines.

Had she caught a sight of Mountain Misery, she would have rushed from her place of concealment, believing beyond a doubt that it was her father. But this was not to be.

It has been mentioned that Dudley Darington was placed upon a couch in a chamber of Red-Eye Roost, and his brother David left to care for him.

But the old man's mind was filled with a whirl of thoughts in connection with Della, whom he almost idolized; and, with insane cunning, he resolved to escape from David, and to search for his darling.

This was easy to do.

David Darington, now utterly prostrated, had fallen asleep in his chair; and Dudley succeeded in getting out of the room, stealing unobserved from the hostelry, and gaining the thicket in which Florette had but a short time previous been hidden.

The old man was bare-headed. Indeed, he had lost his hat between Denver and Pocketville, during his terrible ride.

His coat had also been removed, and, in this condition, he started out on his insane search for the niece he so loved.

Thus he wandered up the shelf that led to the old mine, he being close behind Florette, and she following Ugalala.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONFUSION IN THE CAVERN.

UGALALA was confident of reaching the clump of trees without detection, but he was obliged to proceed with caution, guarding against being seen by any one who might possibly have been stationed to guard against surprise or discovery.

Between the trees and the entrance to the shaft was a clear space, which could not be passed without discovery from the thicket just opposite the arched entrance. To these trees the Indian made his way, and, passing through them, gained a covert on the other side which commanded a view of the shelf.

The thicket he now watched keenly.

The first object in human form that met his view was none other than Mountain Misery. He walked directly to the thicket, and, as he came near, Dick Dirk stepped out from it and asked:

"Where have you been, John?"

It was plain that Dick had mistaken Bentley Bowen for John Black.

Ugalala was about to rush out and join his white brother, when he saw the latter fell the ex-bandit senseless with a blow from his revolver. He then heard a rustling sound close behind him, and, to his further astonishment, beheld the latest arrival at Pocketville, the poor, crazed Dudley Darington, and ten times more insane than ever!

The savage was perplexed.

He shot one glance toward the mine.

There lay Dick Dirk, outstretched and still, but Mountain Misery was gone!

For once in his life the Ute chief stood in his tracks, utterly at a loss what move to make. The crazed old man, who had been coming directly toward him, now swerved aside and shot out upon the shelf, following the same at a rapid run, bounding over the body of Dick and continuing on around the point of the ridge, when he disappeared from view.

Just then, out from the shelf dashed a man whom Ugalala at first believed to be Mountain Misery, but the next moment he felt it must be John Black.

All was silent on the shelf.

John Black darted suspicious glances down the declivity and up toward the point of the ridge. He appeared bewildered.

Then again was the Indian startled by low words in his rear, and, glancing back, he perceived David Darington passing through the clump of trees, while a young girl, with piercing black eyes, and long, raven hair hanging in wild abandon, walked by his side. Her hand was in his, and his face was beaming with great joy, as the maiden spoke to him in low and rapid tones.

David had awakened and, missing his unfortunate brother, had set out to look for him.

Florette was leading the confiding man to his death, although he fondly believed she was conducting him to his daughter Della!

Red-Eye knew not who this young girl was, but she seemed to be a friend of Darington. She must, he imagined, be one of the captured white squaws.

How she had escaped, and why she was conducting the old man in that dangerous direction, was a mystery too deep for the red-man. But then, everything of late had puzzled him. He now looked toward the place where Dick Dirk's body had lain, and saw that it also had vanished. Turning around, he perceived that Darington and the maiden had disappeared in the old mine.

Not strange was it that Ugalala was bewildered by the sudden and unaccountable changes which thus took place before his eyes. He began to think that he had been mistaken in supposing he was concerned in the rescue of the young squaws and the capture of John Black—that his occupation was gone.

Black, before making himself invisible, had removed the unconscious Dick Dirk; and while doing so, had caught a glimpse of his niece, in company with David Darington.

Florette had fulfilled her mission in part.

Filled with fiendish exultation, John dashed into the mine. He knew that Florette would lead Darington direct to the cave, where he had but a few minutes previous left Della, bound and gagged, and where Don Diablo lay, sleeping soundly.

The villain had counted upon torturing both father and daughter to the very soul. He would show his old partner what he had done, would profess to be penitent, and would ask to be permitted to lead a new life and an honorable one, far away from Denver.

Then, when he had seen Della and her father together once more, he would tear her from him, and brutally bind and gag her; keeping on Diablo at hand, to prevent the father's interference. He would then bear the maiden off to another cave-chamber and leave her there, where he gave his former partner the choice of several deaths by torture.

In his triumph, the wretch quite forgot the suspicious circumstances connected with his having found Dick Dirk lying senseless at his feet. This thought now suddenly returned to disturb him.

He hurried back to the chamber, feeling his way as he went.

The cave had been lighted up by wax candles, brought in in the camp chest from Denver; Black having prepared for a possible halt, at a cavern down the range. In a few moments he was by the couch, on which he had left poor Della Darington, fast bound.

She was no longer there!

John gave a sweeping glance on every side of him. The Mexican lay in the same position, breathing heavily, and evidently in a deep sleep.

He knew that Don Diablo had not been awake, and therefore could know nothing of the disappearance of the captive.

He felt confident that she could not make her escape. She must be somewhere near at hand.

But, in what way had she liberated herself? He examined the couch. There were neither gags nor thongs upon it! It was very strange.

Black was furious.

He knew there was no time to search for Della, as, each instant, he expected the entrance of Florette and her victim.

The next minute, the girl appeared.

She spoke in a guarded tone.

"Come! We have reached the place. Mr. Darington, where are you?"

No answer came.

The girl gazed behind her in a troubled manner. At length she spoke again:

"Pass me a torch!"

With a murmured curse, John complied.

Florette darted back into the passage, and ran even to the entrance of the mine, her uncle following.

She had held David Darington's hand, but a few paces from the cave-chamber, when he had stumbled; but the way being then clear ahead, she had kept on.

He had disappeared, most suddenly and mysteriously. Florette could not understand it.

"Ten thousand curses! What does this mean, Florette?" Black cried out, running up beside her. "Where is Darington? I saw him with you, on the shelf below here."

"Yes, you saw him, and I held his hand, and led him to within a few paces of the chamber, but he has vanished. Come! We must find him."

"Florette," was the reply, "there are others in these passages besides our party. I left Della but a few minutes ago, and she too has disappeared. She could not have got away unassisted."

Florette Forbes was speechless, in her amazement.

They returned to the subterranean apartment, and John aroused Don Diablo from his slumbers.

By this time the girl had become a perfect fury. She cried out:

"They are, both of them, near at hand! They must be. I secured them both for you, and if three men cannot guard a weak girl, they had better go to herding sheep. I've lost one, but you can easily find him. I go now for the other. I'll have Dash Dare here before night. I have sworn to avenge the death of my poor father. Let the men of Pocketville beware!"

"When I'm through with the Daringtons, I'll attend to them! All who were concerned in causing the death of William Black shall dearly rue it. I swear it, by all that I love, or expect to love, while life lasts!"

Before John Black could utter a word in remonstrance—for he felt that they had all, and more than they could do, to guard their own lives, Florette had glided away in the dark passage, toward the entrance to the shaft.

Down the shelf she again went, her eyes blazing, and causing Ugalala to be more surprised and bewildered than ever.

What had she done with Darington?

Why had she not brought him and his daughter out from the mine, as he had believed was her intent, and where was she now going?

Such were the questionings that flashed through the mind of the Ute chief.

It was little wonder that he was forced to think he had put his foot into a bag of mystery, and into which he was sinking, even to the depth of uselessness, as far as assisting in the capture of John Black was concerned.

Yet, the Indian did not think it advisable to enter the mine alone, as he believed he would be shot like a dog, as soon as he appeared at the entrance.

He, therefore, decided to wait patiently for at least one more act in the drama—one more startling transformation, or change of scene and character.

The red-man would, no doubt, had he known anything of theatricals, have decided that there were a few who were playing many parts, and too many utility people.

CHAPTER XIV.

MOUNTAIN MISERY TO THE FRONT.

THE suspicion, which had been Bentley Bowen's from the first, namely, that John Black's party were secreted in the old mine, had become certainty, and he resolved to take advantage of his resemblance to the Blacks, to overcome the sentinel, and thus gain admittance to the passages, which were all more or less familiar to him.

He, therefore, walked boldly to the thicket, and was successful, as we have seen, in accomplishing his purpose. He soon found himself in the dark labyrinth of passages.

The sound of John Black's footsteps warned Mountain Misery that he was near those whom

he sought, and he paused. But his patience was not long taxed, for soon Black passed out, although the recluse, on account of the darkness, knew not who it was.

He knew, however, that an opportunity had been left open for him; so he glided instantly to the entrance of the cave, but without making any noise. Glancing within, he was rejoiced beyond measure upon seeing a maiden, lying upon a pile of blankets, in one corner of the chamber. He felt positive that Della Darington was before him.

He was greatly relieved, also, to perceive that the only occupant of the apartment was a Mexican, and he was asleep.

Mountain Misery wasted not a moment, but stole toward the couch. He had for the time being, lost sight of the fact of his strong resemblance to John Black, and was consequently not prepared for the look of horror in the eyes of the young girl.

She believed that it was her captor, and shuddered when she saw the knife in his hand. Had she not been gagged, she would have screamed in her terror, as the glittering blade was thrust toward her.

Della closed her eyes, but soon she felt that the thongs which bound her were being severed. She was, then, to be spared, but for how long?

It was probable that her abductor meant now to remove her to some more secure portion of this subterranean labyrinth. Fortunate was it for them both, that Mountain Misery cut the cords first, and not the gag; indeed it was providential, for the other would have been the more natural thing to do.

The increased pallor of the poor girl now gave Bentley Bowen an inkling of the true state of affairs. She thought him to be John Black, and she was now in terror of her life!

He bent close to her ear, and whispered, in a kindly manner:

"My poor girl, I am not John Black. I am your friend, and the friend of your father and brother, who are now searching for you. I will set you free, and save you from that miscreant. Do not speak, when I remove the gag, or we are both lost!"

Della opened her eyes, filled with wonder.

She was dumfounded.

She still felt convinced that John Black was before her. She believed not a word that he had spoken, but felt that he only intended to remove her beyond all chance of Florette's finding her.

She would have cried out when freed from the gag, had she not feared that he would, in that case, kill her at once. She therefore allowed him to conduct her from the cave, simply because she could not help herself.

Yet she felt, upon second thought, that it would be a relief to get away from the hideous Greaser, whose presence had so terrified her.

Thus was Della Darington taken from the power of John Black, by one who had risked his life in so doing; and, all the while, the unhappy girl was mistaken as to his identity. Greatly grieved and hurt in his feelings was Bentley Bowen; for he knew that, in the maiden's eyes, he was her cowardly persecutor. But he could not, under the circumstances, think this strange or unnatural.

He could only hope that it would soon be in his power to prove to Della how much she had, in her imagination, wronged him.

Putting the cord and gag in his pocket, and catching up a pair of blankets, Mountain Misery led the trembling girl along a passage still further into the bowels of the ridge. Finally he halted, and arranging the blankets in a secluded corner for her to recline upon, he said:

"I see, Miss Darington, that you still mistake me, and that it is useless for me to assure you to the contrary of what you are convinced of; but, I trust it will soon be in my power to prove that I am not John Black, or any one connected with that detestable wretch."

"Only trust in me, and I will return you in safety to your father and brother. Black and his Mexican will be furious, and will search for you, but you will be safe here."

"Will you please tell me where your maid is, who was taken away from your home with you?"

"Mr. Black," said Della, pleadingly, "for God's sake, leave me! Torture me not with your words or presence! You are an excellent actor, but you cannot deceive me. Take me to my father and brother, and I will forgive you everything."

Shaking his head sadly, Bentley Bowen stole away without another word.

All was now silent and dark as a tomb around her, but the maiden felt relieved to be thus alone, though it was there in the very depths of the range.

With all that she firmly resolved that she would not remain there. John Black should not find his victim when he returned.

Della lingered not, but felt her way to the wall of the cave, and thence along the same, until she found the exit, through which she passed, and groped along the rough passages; stepping with caution, as she thus went on further and further from the entrance to the mine.

It was, truly, a terrible situation for a tender maiden, reared in luxury, and surrounded by loving friends all her life. Never before had she been called upon to endure the slightest hardship. Fragile in form, and of an exceedingly sensitive disposition, she could not have been more deplorably placed.

Yet, she showed remarkable strength of will and hopefulness, as well as fortitude and determination, in her dread journey through the gloomy passages of that old mine.

But we leave Della, notwithstanding she is thus situated, and follow Mountain Misery. The latter, after leaving the girl whom he had rescued, hastened again toward the same point at which he had awaited an opportunity to inspect the cave chamber which John Black had just left.

He arrived just in time to detect the return of Black, and much surprised was he that the wretch raised no alarm when he discovered—as he must have done at once—the absence of his captive. But John's silence was soon accounted for. He had heard the approach of the others, and the voice of a female, who seemed to be guiding some one.

Bowen surmised that this must be the girl, Florette; and, from the fact that she was just free, it was but too evident that she must be in league with Black. This suspicion soon became a certainty, for he presently heard her address the man she was escorting, as Mr. Darington.

Mountain Misery had left Pocketville before David Darington had been placed in charge of his brother Dudley, and consequently he believed him to be now in search of his daughter. Instantly he decided that Florette was leading the old man into a trap; pretending to be guiding him, for the purpose of releasing Della.

There could be little doubt of this.

John Black had just passed into the cave, and his niece was conducting Darington to the same point. The wily and vindictive girl was leading her old employer like a lamb to the slaughter, and he was walking kindly to his doom!

Bentley Bowen was satisfied of this.

Stationing himself near the entrance, and trusting that Providence would favor him, he now took advantage of a stumble of Darington, which caused the latter to lose his grasp of the hand of Florette. He clutched the old man, placing one hand over his mouth to prevent, if possible, any outcry.

He thus drew him into a narrow side passage, and hurried him along the same as rapidly as possible, at the same time whispering in his ear:

"I am Mountain Misery. You were being led to your death, David Darington! That girl is a tool of Black's, and was sent out by him to lure you into his power.

"Come with me, and as silently as you can. I have saved your daughter, and will take you to her."

Darington had, when first seized, believed that he was doomed. He was now reassured, however, for he knew that Bowen was not one who would deceive him, and that everything he said in regard to Florette Forbes and her vengeful object must be as he represented it.

Nothing further was spoken by either.

Bentley Bowen conducted the old man to a safe distance, when he bade him be seated, and remain quiet until he returned, as he must, if possible, ascertain what would be John Black's intentions upon being thus baffled, and having his plans thwarted.

There was not sufficient time to conduct Darington to the spot where his daughter had been left, the recluse fearing he might, should he do so, lose the chance of securing John Black and the Mexican, by getting entirely off the trail of the miscreants.

For, since Della Darington had been so mysteriously taken from him, Black would of course know that there were others in the old mine, who were all working toward his capture; and he would, in consequence, hasten with his allies to a safer refuge.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MEETING IN THE MINE.

A LIGHT had begun to break upon Bentley Bowen. He now saw that Florette must have been placed in the Darington household as a spy by the Blacks.

He knew, also, that John Black was not aware that he was still alive, and that Florette could not know of the existence of a man so like in appearance to both her father and uncle.

He therefore made up his mind to give them both a fright if opportunity offered.

If Florette succeeded in luring Dash Dare into the mine, Mountain Misery was confident of being able to prevent any harm being done him. He had already rescued Della, and prevented her father from falling into Black's merciless hands. On this much he could congratulate himself.

When Florette rushed from the shaft with the avowed intention of enticing Dash Dare to his death, and John Black, with Don Diablo, had vowed to scour all the passages and recover their captives, then Bowen knew that there was no time to lose.

He started forward, but not far had he gone, when he received a terrible shock; for he beheld the hideous corpse of Bill Black lying upon a projection of rock quite near him.

Up to that time he had supposed that John had buried the body of his brother when he had first borne it away; but the horrid thing was here, plainly before him. The hermit at once resolved that he would make use of it.

He felt confident that by this time John Black and the Mexican must have left the cave.

Shouldering the corpse, Mountain Misery began making his way slowly and cautiously back as he had come. He succeeded in reaching the chamber without coming in collision with any one. Going in, he found it vacant, as he had expected. He quickly relieved himself of his ghastly burden, placing it upon the couch so recently occupied by Della Darington.

Covering the body up to the neck with blankets, he placed it in a position indicating repose, spreading a handkerchief over the face.

This done, Mountain Misery withdrew.

But all this time we have lost sight of Carl and Dash Dare, whom we left as they set out upon the same route, or nearly so, as Bentley Bowen, and with apparently the same object—namely, that of inspecting the mine.

Dash was some distance in the rear of Carl, when we last saw them, and was endeavoring to overtake him.

The ridge was covered with projections and irregularities, and the scattering cedars and cacti afforded them the shelter necessary to proceeding secretly to their destination.

The Chico giant was crouching behind a small clump of bushes, when he fancied he heard the approach of some one. He was not mistaken.

He was most certainly astounded, however, when he recognized the party who approached, as Dudley Darington.

But a short time previous, Carl had borne this old man, almost helpless and his mind wandering, into Red-Eye Roost, and there left him in charge of his brother. And here he saw him, coming, in a reckless race, leaping over every obstruction, and with an expression on his face that was painful to witness.

It was a mystery how he had escaped, and, more so, how he had found the trail along the shelf, following the same past the entrance to the old mine.

More now than previously did the young giant suspect that John Black's party must be there in covert; for he attributed the demoralized condition of poor Dudley to his having been seen and pursued by the enemy of his house.

Carl knew that it would be little short of a miracle if Dudley Darington escaped death by falling over some precipice, or into some rent in the rocks, if he went on as he was going, for any distance. He decided to capture him. This, he felt would be a mercy.

"I didn't s'pose," he muttered, in soliloquy, "I'd hev ter catch yer again on ther fly, ole man; but hyer ye come, jist a-hummin'!"

"Why in ther name o' sense, didn't yer stop fer 'freshments, es I tole yer, et Red-Eye Roost? Dang ef I ever see sich a fambly fer gittin' inter trouble ginerly es these Darin'tons, all 'ceptin' Dash; an' he'll go plum lunified ef things don't come 'roun' squar' purty soon!"

Dudley Darington was now near the clump of bushes, which were but breast high, and not more than two yards in width.

The giant was concealed by the foliage.

The old man made a terrific leap into the air, clearing the shrubbery; but Carl at once arose,

his brawny hands and arms extended, and blended pity and amusement visible upon his boyish face.

Directly into those arms went Dudley, being caught as dexterously as on the former occasion.

"Hyar we air ag'in, Mister Darin'ton, number two! Hit 'pears we're ter be brunged inter cluss 'quaintance purty frequent an' often. Playin' ther same ole racket, eh?"

"Spect me ter tote yer back ter Red-Eye Roost, an' put yer in yer leetle bed ag'in, does yer? Wa'al, I should puke ef I did! But I don't reckon ye'll go on another rampage until I lets yer loose."

"Lay thar—right thar—Mister Darin'ton! I'll take another squint et yer, later."

While thus speaking, Cache Carl had bound Dudley, hand and foot; but not so as to hurt the old man in any way.

He then left him reclining on some dry bunch-grass, and strode on his way; for he feared he might have lost valuable time.

The presence of the Indian on the east side of the ridge was unknown to the Chico giant. So he went on his way alone.

Dash Dare, having been unable to catch a view of his huge friend, made his way to the top of the ridge, along which he crawled, keeping watch of the trail on the shelf at each side.

It was much rougher traveling on the ridge, and Dash made but slow progress.

Soon, to his surprise, he came upon the form of a man, apparently dead. He lay beside a clump of bushes.

Filled with wonder and concern, the youth made his way down, and was greatly startled when he saw his uncle Dudley, whom he had left, safe and under guard, at the hotel.

Stranger still, the old man was bound!

Dash refrained from unloosing him, for he knew that poor Dudley must be insane.

Remembering that Cache Carl was in advance, young Darington was not long in conjecturing the truth; and he felt that Carl must have good reasons for hurrying on to the old mine, or he would not thus have left the demented old man.

Knowing, too, that Dudley was better off in this way, and being himself nearly wild with anxiety on his sister's account, the young man sped back along the ridge, to his former position. He knew that, if anything occurred on the shelf trail, he would, from such coign of vantage, detect it at once.

To his intense joy and relief, the first living thing perceived by him was Florette, his sister's maid!

This was, to Dash, an important discovery.

He then felt assured that he would find and rescue Della.

Florette Forbes was in a rueful state, being hatless, and her hair flying wildly. The young man had no doubt that she had just escaped from John Black.

She saw Dash, and beckoned him to the shelf trail. She flushed and paled by turns, ruled first by love, and then by hate.

Dash Dare had never paid the slightest attention to Florette when at home, but he had always thought her pretty; and now, all untidy as she was, she seemed to him more beautiful than ever.

He was himself, handsome and graceful, intelligent and brave.

He was, withal, warm-hearted and impulsive.

What was the result?

He ran directly to the side of the young girl, and threw his arms around her.

"Oh, Florette!" he cried; "thank God, you are safe! When did you escape from John Black, and where is my poor sister?"

The words came hastily, impulsively, and impressively.

Florette trembled in his arms.

Every nerve and muscle, every fiber in her being, quivered with a passion that was so deep.

Her face was the pallor of death.

She could not speak.

She could not look in the face of the man she had so madly loved, and whom she had sworn to lead to his death.

"Poor Florette!" said Dash, pityingly and apologetically. "I am too rough, too hasty, too inconsiderate!"

He partly released her hold, but the girl still clung to him.

"You have suffered greatly," he continued. "That is plain to be seen. But John Black shall pay dearly for this!"

"Can you, will you lead me to Della? Have you the strength, Florette?"

Every time that Dashiell Darington mentioned his sister, the words pierced Florette's

a knife. Hers was a love—if such it could be called—that would allow no other affection to come between it and its object.

She was a thorough Mexican at heart.

For some seconds hate would surge in her brain, and then love would banish it.

At length she pointed toward the cave.

"Della is there," she said.

She feigned weakness, that she might have his support. His arms were, for the first, perhaps for the last time, around her.

Was she leading him to the doom that awaited him at John Black's hands?

Would love or hate conquer, at the moment of all moments in the life of Dash Dare?

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT NEXT?

MATTERS were becoming somewhat complicated on both sides.

Poor Della Darington, left alone in the darkness, wandered on and on, into the far depths of the old mine. Surely her guardian angel must have guided her footsteps; for she eventually discovered a faint glow, which increased as she proceeded, and she soon knew that she had found a way to the outer world.

Hastening forward, she saw that a rough and somewhat tunnel-like passage led out from the mine by a steep ascent.

On she went, until she reached the opening, through which she crawled, and, the next moment, the bright sun blazed down upon her golden hair! Then she looked around her.

She saw that she was in a small basin, a mass of loose rocks on every side.

Up she climbed, and, it so chanced, on the east side.

She stood on the very top of the ridge!

Gazing downward, she saw, some distance below, the trail along the rocky shelf.

And she saw more than that.

At first she imagined she must be dreaming, and she drew her fingers over her eyes, closing the lids, and again opening them. Then she knew that the scene was real.

Far below, walking side by side, Della Darington saw her brother Dash and Florette Forbes, his arm supporting the maiden's form!

Florette, then, had in some way escaped, and was now evidently guiding Dash to the rescue of herself.

They would both be killed—it was almost certain—by John Black!

They were going to their death, and for her sake!

Thus thought Della, and she was about to shriek aloud to them, when she beheld the form of an Indian, knife in hand, gliding through the low bushes along the shelf, and disappearing in the large clump of pines, through which, in a minute more, Dash and Florette must pass.

She strove to cry out, but her emotions were too deep, and her anguish too overpowering.

A deathly faintness came over her, and her grasp upon the wall of the basin relaxed; but, just as she was about to fall back upon the rough rocks, Cache Carl sprang over the south wall and caught her in his strong arms!

"Bless my soul!" he chuckled; "ef I ain't t' boss o' ther catch biz, an' ther hull Darin' fambly know it, I reckon. Pore leetle gal! Ss Dash's sister, sure es shootin'. Hit's lucky sh wilted, fer I sw'ar I don't believe I c'd'p brass enough fer ter gaze et her, ef she w'ter put her peepers on me.

Dang my duds ef she didn't crawl outen th' ridge! She's 'scaped from John Black w'out ther help o' any of us. But I'll jist mander fer ter 'vestigate fuder. Thar's funny bi goin' on, I reckon, an' I hain't bin mixed up in it es much es I orter bin."

Thus soliloquizing, and holding Della on one arm, the Chico giant climbed out from the basin. Then, taking her carefully in his arms, he descended the west side of the ridge, in his excitement seeing nothing of Dash Dare and Florette.

Having reached the shelf, Carl was in a quandary how to proceed, and extremely anxious in regard to the prolonged fainting-fit of his fair charge. He well knew that, while in this position, he must avoid coming up with John Black, or either of his confederates, for they would have greatly the advantage over him, and would stand a good chance to recapture Della.

He seated himself upon a rock to think over his peculiar and perplexing position.

Further on it will be seen that Cache Carl, notwithstanding the way in which he was situated, concluded to continue on to the mine, and to hand in the game.

Will now, however, return to Dash Dare and Florette.

It was quite natural that the young man should feel much sympathy for the trials and terrors which Florette had been, as he supposed, forced to undergo. He was also thankful above everything to her for guiding him to his sister, and he could not but admire her courage and the cunning she had displayed in escaping from her captor.

His manner and words, therefore, to Florette, were in consonance with these feelings, and so it was that this strange girl's love was, for the time, master of her vengeance.

But few words, however, passed between them. They were so near their destination, and there was such necessity for caution and silence, that little was said.

The maiden insisted that she could guide Dash directly to the cave in which his sister was sequestered, and, if it occurred to him that, such being the case, she might herself have released her, he did not betray the thought.

Ugalala had decided to pass down the shaft a short distance from the clump of pines, and watch the proceedings of Florette, for the Ute was more puzzled than he had ever been on any trail, and could not understand why the white squaw had taken David Darington into the mine and left him there.

In the Indian's way of thinking the two ought to have reappeared with Della.

But, instead, he saw Dash Dare hasten down the ridge and meet Florette, the pair then starting up the shelf toward the old mine.

Had there been any doubts in the mind of the red-man as to the girl's being in league with John Black, the way in which Dash met her would have banished them.

Ogalala was confident that everything was working well; yet, he returned in a secret manner to the grove of pines, there taking up his old position, from which he could view the entrance to the underground chambers.

He had not been there more than two or three minutes, when he saw Dick Dirk spring from the bushes into the old mine.

When the savage saw that the hostler had recovered from the blow which Mountain Misery had struck him, he became very anxious; for he saw that Florette's plan to release Della would be frustrated by Dick.

Having come to this conclusion, Red-Eye decided that the time for him to act had arrived; and, without waiting for the advent of Dash and his fair companion, he, with knife in one hand and revolver in the other, rushed up to the shelf, and into the shaft.

But, at the very moment the Ute thus darted into the dark passage, there came a series of the most piercing shrieks echoing through the caverns!

These sounds reached the ears of Dash Dare and Florette Forbes, on the east side of the ridge, and also of Cache Carl on the west; but the latter was some distance further around the point of the ridge than were Dash and his wily escort.

The Indian had not gotten beyond the glow of daylight on his way inside the mine, when he was suddenly made aware of the presence of Mountain Misery by a peculiar, low signal; and the next moment the hermit, dragging David Darington along, met his red pard. The three then rushed out of the cave, in the full flare of the sunlight.

Darington was pale as a corpse, having evidently been frightened nearly out of his wits.

But, before a word could be spoken, Dash Dare and Florette sprang out from among the pines; the youth, with a cry of relief and no little surprise, bounding toward his father, leaving Florette, who stood gazing at Bentley Bowen in bewildered astonishment.

She believed him, so strong was the resemblance, to be John Black, who, here and in her presence, was liberating the very man whom she thought he had recaptured in the cavern! And then, to her further surprise and fury, she perceived a gigantic man—a stranger to her—dart around the point of rocks toward the group, who would have yelled in their joy, had not the supposed John Black given a cautionary signal to prevent it.

These last arrivals, as of course the reader knows, were Cache Carl and Della Darington—the latter still in a swoon.

Mountain Misery bade all remain near the entrance of the mine, declaring that he would shoot the first who followed him. Then he darted back into the gloomy passage, first, however, ordering Ugalala to climb to the top of the ridge and signal the scattered miners by three shots from his revolver, fired in quick succession.

Florette stood like a statue.

The scene, as far as her uncle—for so she still thought him—was concerned, was a complete mystery.

Had John Black, then, after all, repented and given up all his plans and intentions—cast aside all thoughts even of revenge?

The question was one which the young girl might put to herself, but could not answer.

David Darington clasped his daughter in his arms, and seated himself, while Dash was trying to assure himself that Della, as Cache Carl asserted, had only fainted.

As for the latter, he jerked out his revolvers and stood ready for business.

It was probable that he was the only one present who had a correct idea of what Mountain Misery intended, for he stepped to the west side of the entrance, and motioned to Dash Dare to go the east.

There was no time to question each other.

All felt that something serious was about to occur—that the end of the Black drama was not far off.

The Indian's signal sounded startlingly, the shots rolling along the range in wild echoes.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FACE OF THE DEAD.

IN the depths of the old mine, Mountain Misery had lost all patience, waiting for the return of John Black and the Mexican from their search through the caverns and passages for Della and her father; and he made his way to the passage in which he had left David, finding him there in the same position, the poor man having been too terrified to move.

Leaving Darington with a few encouraging words, the recluse proceeded on to the chamber to which he had conducted Della. He called the maiden's name, but there was no answer.

He then struck a match, and, to his consternation, found the cavern to be empty. He was almost in despair.

Bentley Bowen knew that the poor girl had believed him to be John Black, and that dreading his return, she had stolen away in terror.

Never before had the hermit so deeply regretted his singular resemblance, not even when he had been mistaken for Bill Black, and had come so near being hanged.

He now felt that it would be useless to search for Della. She might be found by Black; and if so he would rescue her. The first thing now to be done, was to conduct her father from the cave. He, therefore, hastened back, and led Darington toward the exit from the mine.

Before reaching the main passage, however, he heard John Black and Don Diablo conversing, and cursing in their baffled rage.

They were making their way to the cave-chamber.

He then heard a third man rush up, and demand of Black why he had knocked him senseless. Mountain Misery felt that this must be the sentinel, who had recovered.

His employer denied the charge, pronouncing Dick Dirk crazy.

Hastening on to the exit, and meeting Ugalala, as has been recorded, our three friends passed out upon the shelf, to be astounded and filled with relief at beholding Dash Dare, Cache Carl and Della Darington.

The shrieks of horror, that followed this, were sufficient to inform Mountain Misery that Black and his followers had entered the cave, and there had come upon the horrible corpse of Bill Black, lying upon the couch so recently occupied by Della!

Bowen resolved to take advantage of their fright at once. Hence his action in the case; his warning none to follow him. Ere long he was near the cave-chamber, from which proceeded furious curses. The recluse knew that John Black had planted himself at the exit, pistol in hand, and was preventing Don Diablo and Dick Dirk from fleeing in terror from the mine.

"Satan burn you for a pair of idiots!" the listener heard Black hiss at them. "You know well enough that this is not the work of spirits. There is some one in the mine, I admit; and he has guided the girl and her father to some secret cave, but we will find them yet."

"There can be but one, or we should have been attacked openly. He brought poor Bill's body here to scare us, but it don't scare me worth a cent. You fellows may walk on the other side, and I'll carry the corpse out of here alone. Then, I reckon, you'll get over your infernal scare."

"I'll shoot you if you try to pass me! You started in with me, and you've got to stick. You hear me? I mean biz every time!"

Mountain Misery could hear the cautious foot-

steps of the affrighted pair, as they obeyed. Then he heard the slight sounds made by John Black, when he removed the body of his brother, which he brought nearer and nearer his place of concealment, at length placing it almost at his feet.

The recluse bent low, and caught the right arm of the corpse, slapping the clammy hand directly in the face of John Black; knowing, by the heavy breathing of the latter, just where to aim the stroke.

A fierce oath shot out from the startled miscreant. He sprung erect, and stumbled backward against the rock wall, his teeth chattering.

"The devil and all his imps are surely in this accursed hole!" he muttered.

He turned, and started back rapidly toward the cave-chamber. That he did not strike a match, proved to Bowen that he was terribly frightened. With noiseless steps, the latter followed him.

Black staggered into the cave, and the ejaculations of Don Diablo and Dick Dirk proved that he showed plainly the terrible shock he had received. But Mountain Misery allowed no time for explanations.

He was resolved to make one last move.

With arms hanging limp, form stiff and erect, eyes protruding, and tongue lolling out, he stalked, ghost-like, into the dimly-lighted chamber, where stood Dick and the Mexican, gazing at John Black!

The three pairs of horror-filled eyes were turned upon the intruder, to be doubly filled with superstitious terror.

They stood, as if suddenly petrified; their blood frozen in their veins, and they rendered incapable of movement or of giving vent to their horror in shrieks.

At length, the dread spell upon them all was broken; and, with fearful yells that one would think might arouse the dead, they rushed frantically from the cave, and from that awful presence. John Black seemed even more terrified, more anxious to reach the open air, than the cowardly Dick Dirk, or the superstitious Don Diablo.

It so happened that the Mexican and Dick ran against each other in the dark passage, Black being ahead in the race, and both fell directly upon the real corpse, which lay at the entrance to a side passage. They each one could feel the ice-cold hands and face.

Then such gurgling and horrible sounds as broke from the lips of the pair were seldom heard. They crawled away, staggered to their feet, and ran out of the mine.

The scene that followed beggared description.

Those on the outside, with the exception of Cache Carl, were astonished, not only at the voluntary exit of the outlaws, but to behold them in such abject terror.

And who could imagine the emotions of those who rushed from the mine, when they saw, standing in front of them, the maiden they had held captive, and the father and brother they had sworn to slay?

But even the strange tableau before them could not banish the horrors they had just left behind.

Those whom they now beheld could know nothing of the scenes in the mine.

They feared not the leveled revolvers of the avengers.

On both sides of the entrance, and for some yards beyond, were collected the men of the mines, their faces betraying their fury, and their determination to punish the plotters and abductors by death!

But the three men appeared not to realize this. They seemed not to notice, except by a glance, that others were so near, whose presence they might well dread.

Instead they whirled about, and gazed back into the arched and gloomy entrance of the old mine, from which they had just darted, only to be again stricken dumb with increased superstitious terror.

For, on the inner side of the entrance, and leaning against the stone wall, was the corpse of Bill Black, in a semi-recumbent position; while, seated against the opposite wall was Mountain Misery, who, acting as when in the cave chamber, had almost the appearance of the real corpse!

When the wretched trio had been allowed sufficient time to fasten their eyes upon this dread spectacle, the hermit sprung to his feet and rushed at them.

Never did men bound backward more quickly, gather their strength, whirl, and spring wildly away; the fact that they had stood but a few

feet from the edge of the gulch wall having been unnoticed, or unconsidered by them.

When they realized it, it was too late.

The mad force with which they had made the start in the extremity of their terror, it was now beyond their power to counteract.

With terrific shrieks, they shot out, and over the awful height!

But, the same instant, the rattling reports of full a hundred revolvers sounded on the air, and the three miscreants went down into the great chasm, riddled with lead.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FLASH OF FURY.

KIND reader, there is little more to be told in connection with the abduction and rescue of Della Darington, and the defeat of the final treacherous and dastardly plot of the Black brothers.

It had chanced that, when Ugalala shot off the signal for the miners to inform them that the party they were in search of had been found, the crowd were already in the vicinity of the old mine. They had become discouraged in their march, collected together, and decided that as no one had seen Cache Carl, Dash Dare, Mountain Misery, or Red-Eye, these men must have gone north, to search the ridge.

This brought to their minds, the old shaft, as a probable hiding-place for Black and those who were with him; and all concluded, at once, to go up the shaft-trail.

This they had done, when the signal sounded; and they then rushed, at full speed, reaching the end of the ridge in time to witness the singular but effective ruse of Mountain Misery, forcing the outlaws from their stronghold.

But Bentley Bowen had not thought of such an ending to his plot to frighten the miscreants. What he believed was, that they would rush out and be captured by those who would punish them as they deserved.

However, it was well; for the maddened mob of miners would have hanged all three of them, and they had certainly suffered sufficient mental torture already. Besides, their career of crime was at an end.

As for Florette Forbes, she stood like one transformed to stone. She had expected, previous to the leaping off from the height of the trio, that all would be lynched, and she knew there was no escape for them. She was rejoiced, therefore, that John Black had cheated the mob to that extent.

Florette knew that Mountain Misery had been in the cave—that it must have been he who had stolen Darington from her in the passage, and afterward released Della. Consequently he must have heard her words and those of John Black, and therefore knew their relationship.

He would know, too, that she had decoyed the elder Darington, and would decoy his son to death. There was, then, no hope for her!

As for any further thought of Dash Dare, that was preposterous.

She would now banish love forever, and nurse revenge.

She would avenge the death of her father and uncle—ay, even to the slaying of the youth who had won her heart.

Thus resolved, and seeing an opening for possible escape, and a further work of vengeance, Florette Forbes, as the last revolver shots echoed in the range above, sprung to the entrance of the mine, drawing a pistol as she ran.

Once there, she faced about, leveled her weapon, and fired at Dash Dare, who fell to the earth!

"Men of Pocketville!" she yelled; "I am Florette the Fury, the daughter of William Black, and the niece of John, both of whom you have hunted to their death!"

"I have sworn to avenge them, and this shot has begun the work. Follow me if you dare! Death to all who enter the old mine!"

"I love Dashiell Darington, and that proves how merciless I am—how determined to carry out my oath."

"I'll see you later. You'll have to remember with dread Florette the Fury!"

Before any one of the spectators had moved in his tracks, the infuriated girl had disappeared in the dark bowels of the ridge, her taunting and vengeful laugh sounding fiendish amid the caverns and passages.

Notwithstanding her threats, many rushed into the shaft, procured torches, and searched until discouraged; but not a trace could be found of Bill Black's daughter.

Dash Dare was, however, but slightly hurt, the bullet having merely glanced on his skull.

Of course everybody, with the exception of Mountain Misery, was astonished. But there

was little delay at the shelf, as all were nearly famished, and greatly fatigued as well.

Della Darington had recovered, while her villainous abductor and his allies had gone to answer for that and the many more devilish crimes they had previously committed.

Cache Carl brought poor Dudley Darington from the spot at which he had left the unfortunate old man securely bound. He was now much more collected in mind, and was greatly delighted when he beheld his niece, beginning rapidly to regain all the sense that he ever had.

Our friends then all proceeded down the shelf and toward the town, Dash and his father assisting Della, while Carl conducted Dudley—Mountain Misery and Ugalala taking the lead.

The miners lingered behind long enough to hurl the corpse of Bill Black over the height into the great gulch, where the mangled remains of his brother, with those of Don Diablo and Dick Dirk lay in a confused mass; all having decided that such a bad lot were not worthy of any rites of sepulture.

The Indian sped on in advance when near the town, and gave the glad tidings to Crystal Charley, who at once had accommodations prepared for the unexpected but truly welcome female guest, whose presence in Pocketville was considered a great and long to be remembered honor.

And a grand *entree* it was.

A number of the miners, having sped, helter-skelter, past those who have figured as our principal characters, and formed a long line opposite Red-Eye Roost, gave three rousing cheers of welcome to Della.

"The Darling of the Divide," as the golden-haired maiden was escorted, between her father and brother, into the hotel.

Cache Carl, as was to have been expected, took charge of the crowd, and made himself responsible for the several "irrigates" that were deemed necessary to put all in trim.

But Mountain Misery was the lion of the hour, and he was now called upon to explain all that had taken place in the mine; indeed, explanations were in order, all around between those who had providentially led in that direction in their search.

Various were the theories as to where Florette had secreted herself, and many speculations were indulged in, as to whether she would be heard from again; some expressing the belief that she would keep her oath, and scatter "cussedness" generally into Pocketville—perhaps giving the Darington family, after their return to Denver, good reasons for regretting that she had not flung herself over into the gulch, with her hopeful uncle and his followers.

The bodies of Brooks and Saunders were "planted" with scant ceremony.

The horses, with their harness, and the pole of the ambulance, were brought into town, and the entire outfit put in shape for travel; the Daringtons leaving for their home on the following day, but not without a good "send-off" from the men of the mines.

A more relieved and thankful party never, it is probable, started on their homeward way than the reunited quartette, taking with them Bentley Bowen, Cache Carl, and Ugalala. Ute. David Dudley and Della occupied rear of the ambulance, Mountain Misery and red pard being seated in front; the latter taking charge of the team, while Dash Dare and Chico giant galloped in the lead.

And good reasons had the Daringtons, and all, for thankfulness that they had escaped the vengeful plots of the Black brothers. Not one was there of the family, after all knowledge each had gained from the other, did not at times recall the tigerish look that Florette Forbes had cast at them before she sprang into the old mine, and the vow of vengeance she there and then recorded.

It may be that, in the near future, some one will be able to explain why Florette, the Fury, could not be found; and may detail events that occurred in her attempts to fulfill her wild oath of revenge.

There are others, whom we know, who can scarcely fail to figure in such a narrative; their interest in the unhappy girl, to say nothing of motives of self-preservation, would, all likelihood, lead them to something more than mere curiosity in regard to her movements.

Chief among such, we may see that not "hunter o' crooked humans," Cache Carl from Chico, and those who leagued themselves with him to put down outlawry and bad white men generally—Ugalala the Ute, Bentley Bowen, alias Mountain Misery, and Dash Dare.

THE END.

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